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Summer's finally here.
Mafuyu, Chiaki, Senpai and I.
The four of us gathered together to form the Folk Music Reserach Club,
and welcomed summer together for the very first time.
Mafuyu's as unfriendly as ever,
and band practices were as disharmonious as before.
It was a certain day before the summer holidays when our club president, Kagurazaka-senpai suddenly said,
"The preparations for the training camp are all set and ready to go."
Why is that person saying that all of a sudden!
Is it really fine to hold a training camp just like that?





Kagurazaka Kyouko: The girl who lives for romance and revolution

"We think of swimsuits whenever we talk about summer, and we relate swimsuits with going to the beach for a training camp, right?"
There's something wrong with the sequence of your associations, yeah?

Moreover, we're going there to practice, no?

"Oops, I accidentally revealed my true intentions."

It can't be that you actually just want to see the rest of us in swimsuits, right?

Aihara Chiaki: The drummer from the martial arts faction

"It's been a long time since I've taken a swim! I'll have to get a brand new swimsuit first~"

So you don't really care about practice either huh.

"I know, we've got to practice too, right?"

We can do squat jumps at the beach during the evening."

What sort of training is that! That's the reason why you're overly sports-oriented.

Ebisawa Mafuyu: Has unrivaled willfulness

"Training camp.....?"

You don't want to go?

"..... I don't know."

This girl still isn't used to getting along with the rest of the band, I guess?

And she doesn't really talk to me much either.

In any case, the summer I was waiting in anticipation for, along with a growing sense of uneasiness, had finally begun.

Chapter 1 - The Real Name

"How do I pronounce your name?"

On a certain Monday after school, at the end of the semester, Mafuyu asked me that question. Soon after, the door of the classroom opened, revealing the school's courtyard right outside. The cries of the cicadas emanated from some unknown direction in the shade of the trees. It was quite irritating. I was pressing my face against the floor, trying to tighten the screws at the bottom of the door with a screwdriver. I thought I had heard wrong, so I lifted my body—

"What? Did you just say something?"

On the left-hand side of the narrow classroom, Mafuyu was sitting on the long desk next to the drum set. She was pressing the cold Oolong bottle I had just bought for her against her face. She's probably quite bad at dealing with the heat, huh? Not only was her face redder than usual, even the back of her neck—hidden under her maroon-colored hair—as well as her arms—hidden beneath the short sleeves of her summer uniform—was dyed a pale red. However, she wasn't sweating one bit. Her navy blue eyes seemed a little dazed.

"Your name. I still don't know how to pronounce your name."

How to pronounce my name? We're from the same class, we sit next to each other, and we're even together during club activities, and yet, she still doesn't know? But..... thinking about it a little deeper, there was probably no way for her to know. This girl had just come back from overseas not too long ago, so she probably wasn't that good with Kanji.

"Everyone calls you Nao this, Nao that—I have no idea how to pronounce the rest of your name. Naoki?"

"Nah, that's not it." She probably read it wrong. "Urm..... why are you asking this all of a sudden?"

"Because you are always addressing me directly by my name! It

just feels unfair."

Unfair huh? With the current situation, I couldn't just change the way I addressed her—from "Mafuyu" to "Ebisawa-san"—even if she wanted me to (moreover, she'd get angry if I did). We'll probably be even more easily misunderstood if she calls me directly by my name too, right? But it wasn't like we weren't already misunderstood anyway.^[1]

"..... It's pronounced Naomi. It sounds really girly, so everyone calls me Nao."

"I see. Naomi."

"Yes?"

"Just trying it out. You don't like it?"

I didn't hate it, but..... it was a little embarrassing. I shifted my gaze away from Mafuyu's face and returned to squatting next to the door.

"Naomi."

"Can you stop saying my name randomly if there's nothing going on?"

"No, I have a reason this time."

I lifted my head and saw Mafuyu gently shaking the bottle in her hand.

"That's something simple, so open it yourself."

Just as I was about to say that, I remembered her fingers were immobile. I placed the screwdriver down and walked to her side to twist open the cap. She took the bottle from me without even saying thanks, and took a huge gulp from it. Her expression changed immediately, and she stuck out her tongue in disgust.

"What's wrong?"

"It's so bitter! There wasn't any sugar added to this Oolong tea. Idiot, why did you buy this kind?"

No, you don't normally add sugar to Oolong tea, yeah? Ah, hold on a second..... "Is this your first time drinking Oolong tea from Japan?" Well, she had been living abroad since she was young. And

I recalled that, although iced Oolong tea originated from Japan, China became the major exporter of the tea later. I also heard that Oolong tea with sugar added to it had become mainstream in other countries.

"The one I drank during the China tour was really sweet! No, I can't drink this."

Mafuyu got off the desk and placed the bottle on the ground next to me.

"Here, you can have the rest."

I couldn't help but look at the opening of the bottle Mafuyu had drunk from, and then at her lips, wet from the tea she had drunk. After being together in the same club for about half a month, I did get to know more about her, and one of the things I learned was how insensitive she was when it came to things like this.

"But the Oolong tea I bought in America was sweet....."

She mumbled to herself as she made her way to a corner of the room. She opened the guitar case proficiently with her left hand and took out her favorite Stratocaster. The way she tuned was really unique—she used only her left hand. Her index finger gently pressed the nodal points, while her little finger plucked the strings. All her right hand did was support the body of the guitar; she didn't use the fingers on that hand at all.

In the end, it turned out the three fingers, aside from the thumb and index finger, on Mafuyu's right hand were completely immobile. According to the initial diagnosis of an American specialist, they probably needed quite a bit of time before they could return to normal. She may have to go overseas sometime in the future to get them treated.

Still..... In any case, Mafuyu came back from America.

Back to the high school I was studying at.



It was pretty scary how fast the gossip in the magazines traveled. One month before Mafuyu left for America, several magazines had already published color images of Mafuyu on their covers. The

movements of the girl piano prodigy, who had disappeared from the international stage two years ago, was well grasped by everyone, probably in no small part due to the fact that her father—the "world-renowned Ebisawa"—was travelling with her. Additionally, everyone also knew about her fingers.

It was said that, at the start of this month, when Mafuyu returned to Japan with her father, a lot of reporters had gathered at the airport. However, when her father went to retrieve their luggage, Mafuyu disappeared. Rumor was that she had been taken away by three unknown teenage boys and girls, and after some digging, the suspects were identified to be club members of a certain Folk Music Research Club that had a secret agenda. Is it really fine for us to be described like that.....? After that, I made a call to Ebichiri, asking him to help explain everything to the media. He was fuming mad.

Half a month went by before things around Mafuyu finally died down.

The pianist Ebisawa Mafuyu had always been really silent, but now, she has her guitar. For her, the guitar was probably not something to escape to, but rather, another path to walk on.

After I was done with the door, I screwed the cap onto the Oolong tea bottle. Then, I stood up, walked to Mafuyu's side, and took out my bass.



"So what's going on now? Why is Ebisawa directly addressing you as Naomi?"

Chiaki, who was late, asked that unhappily, then sat down on the chair of the drum set and guzzled down Mafuyu's leftover Oolong tea. As expected of a Judo black-belt—even though her body size was roughly the same as Mafuyu's, when she stared at me with her eyes opened wide, it felt like she could immediately grab me by the back of my neck, despite her being quite a considerable distance away from me. After much difficulty, I finally sealed the gap beneath the door, meaning we could finally switch on the air conditioning—however, there's already a gust of chilling air in here, so I don't really think the air conditioning is necessary.

The problem started with the Oolong tea. Chiaki spotted the bottle when she stepped into the classroom. "This is Nao's, right? Then I'll be drinking it!" And with that, she was about to take a huge gulp from it. Just then, however, Mafuyu said in a strangely angry voice, "I gave that to Naomi!" Why are you girls doing this? Please head outside if you want to quarrel!

"Look! Ever since he was young, Nao has been bullied because of how girly his name is, resulting in psychological trauma. When he hears someone call him by his given name, he becomes so frightened he actually pees his bed at night!" Bullshit! Stop fabricating my past as you please! "That's why I get everyone to call him Nao, so why is Ebisawa calling him by his given name?"

"Who knows?" Mafuyu answered without giving much of a damn. "I will address him however I please."

"Fine! Then I'll address Ebisawa as Mafuyu!"

"I asked you people to address me as that a long time ago."

"Ah, right."

Mafuyu still disliked it when others addressed her by her family name. It seemed she hadn't completely reconciled with her father yet.

"That won't do. There should be a more embarrassing name for you. Ebi-chan's already taken..... Hmm, since your name's Mafuyu..... how about Mafu-Mafu?"

"That sounds so awkward. People will definitely think you got my name wrong."

"No way."

Using the floor tom as a table, Chiaki and Mafuyu continued their satire of each other. I felt the whole thing was rather silly, so I focused on tuning my bass. By the time I was done tuning and was about to plug my bass into the amplifiers, it seemed Mafuyu was already tired of arguing with Chiaki, who was saying "Mafu-Mafu" at every instance she could. Mafuyu directed her attention back to her guitar.

With her lips clamping the pick, she slipped her fingers—that could hardly muster any strength—into the loops of the pick, and in the

next instant, swung her hand down with force. A series of sharp sounds leaped out from the Marshall amplifiers, like a gush of powerful flowing waters; the impact made me feel as though my spine were impaled by drills. My body trembled uncontrollably—I grasped my bass again with my sweaty palms.

Mafuyu didn't use any effects units, so it sounded just as it was: the guitar and the amplifiers—the rawest form of energy produced by combining the most basic technology of the Fender and Marshall companies. Hanon's [**<Virtuoso Piano - Exercise #43>**](#)—even though it should be a very lifeless tune—commonly used to practice finger techniques—the notes that flowed out of Mafuyu's guitar could never fail to accelerate the throbbing heart within me.

As I shifted my gaze back to my bass, I suddenly heard the sound of the cymbals entering. It integrated itself with Mafuyu's guitar while playing semiquavers, producing a rough metallic sound. The bass drum stomped in rowdily, as though it were ushering them along. The drum sticks in Chiaki's hands were moving rhythmically with great speed, and looked just like the wings of a dragonfly dancing in the air.

Mafuyu looked upwards suddenly and abruptly halted the performance. I thought Chiaki had stopped along with Mafuyu, but she was actually observing Mafuyu's breathing, and managed to ride on Mafuyu's tempo perfectly when Mafuyu resumed her play. So they're quarreling with their instruments after the earlier squabble? Well, recent practices have always started out on a similar note..... and it's all thanks to the club president who's always late! I held my breath and gently plucked the strings of my bass. I dove into my own notes amid the machine-gun-esque melody, and searched for my own space.



Suddenly, the doors opened and a gush of hot air flowed into the room, interrupting the jam session.

"Morning comrades! So you guys are already ablaze? I'm really happy to see that!"

There was a tall slender silhouette at the entrance. Her eyes were

sharp, just like those of the Queen of beasts. Her long jet-black hair was tied back due to the summer heat, making her look all the more impressive. She was the president of our Folk Music Research Club: Kagurazaka Kyouko-senpai.

Senpai didn't wear a bow-tie on top of her collar, and the top of her blouse was left unbuttoned, to a state that I had no idea where I should place my sight. She was carrying a guitar case on her shoulders. Seeing as how she was sweating quite a bit, she probably just arrived at school on her bicycle (if she had arrived here in the morning, she should've placed her guitar in the room first, like Mafuyu and me). This person's always like this, so how on earth did she manage to not repeat a year? And to top it off, she also didn't pay any tuition. That mystery was probably strange enough to be listed as one of the Seven Inconceivable Mysteries of our school.

"Comrade Ebisawa doesn't look quite happy today either—what a beautiful sight!" Senpai praised Mafuyu while walking past me to get close to her. Mafuyu had nowhere to run, so all she could do was watch helplessly as Senpai hugged her tightly and rubbed her cheeks against her own. Rather than feeling a sense of disgust, Mafuyu looked as though she was just embarrassed. She stared at me with a gaze crying for help, making me feel quite troubled as well.

"Ah, no worries, I didn't forget about you Comrade Aikawa! Your hair seems slightly shorter? Hmm, you're still cute either way."

With that, Senpai hugged Chiaki's head and stroked her hair. Chiaki seemed really happy, and even buried the tip of her nose in Senpai's chest. I almost felt like saying "Sorry for interrupting," before just walking out of the classroom.

"Young man, you're the one who fixed the door?" Senpai suddenly directed the conversation to me.

"Eh? Ah. Y-Yeah."

Because the door couldn't be shut tight, noise could escape from the room through the slit below. Moreover, the slit also decreased the efficiency of the air conditioning.

"Well, it's great that the sounds won't escape the room anymore," Senpai looked at the door and spoke softly, "But that also means the

air conditioning will become much cooler....."

What, isn't that something good? The best part about music clubs is that we can use the air conditioners during summer, no? Just then, Senpai released Chiaki and leaned towards me.

"One of the most beautiful scenes of Japan during the summer, is the white blouses of the young girls turning translucent and wet due to the sweat from their skin. However, due to the widespread use of air conditioning, these beautiful scenes are slowly disappearing from our sight. Young man, what do you think? If we're to practice without any air conditioning....."

"Please, just spare me from that! There's four people in this enclosed room, yeah!?"

It was one of the things I found out only after joining this club, which consisted of three girls and one guy..... and that was..... the fact that Kagurazaka-senpai really did like girls. I originally thought she was just joking, but the things this person says really are true.

"How about we all splash some water on ourselves before starting our practice?" Chiaki suggested.

"Definitely not! You'll damage the instruments like that," Mafuyu raised a surprisingly serious objection.

"Comrade Aihara, you don't get it. Sweat is not just water with salt, but blood that we proletarians bleed, all for the sake of revolution!"

Chiaki tilted her head—she probably had no idea what Senpai was talking about. Well, me too.

"Then how about we go to a cooler place to practice? I want to go to the beach!"

"How do you practice at the beach....."

"Nah, you can! In fact, I've already borrowed a villa."

Senpai suddenly said that, making me turn my head around in shock. A villa?

"A training camp in summer! We head out on the twenty-eighth of July, and it'll last three days and two nights. Since I've snatched the villa from a friend of mine, the accommodations will be totally free—

moreover, the villa is located right next to the beach!"

With that, Senpai took a stack of A4-sized handouts—which she had made, unknown to all of us—out of a pocket in her guitar case. The words "Details for the Folk Music Research Club's summer camp" were written on it. I was rooted to the ground, due how sudden everything was.

"Wow, awesome! Nao, take a look, quickly!"

Chiaki stepped over the drum set and passed me the top sheet of the handouts. I absolutely couldn't comprehend why the handouts had to be printed in color, but the image of a white villa, standing in isolation next to the beach, over the backdrop of the evening sky, did look rather appealing.

"No, well..... wait, this is my first time hearing about the training camp. Did Senpai obtain permission from the teacher?"

"Nope! On the surface, it's just the four of us heading to the beach to play."

Is that fine..... Is that really alright?

"If we obtained permission from the school to organize an official training camp, the teacher-in-charge would have to come along as well, right? If so, things would be much more troublesome and complicated. Miss Maki is a beauty, and I do wish to see her in her swimsuit; however, recently, I haven't really been interested in people older than me."

"Eh? Ah, urm, what should I say—no wait!"

I slammed my hand on the cymbals next to me without a second thought. What the heck is this person saying!

"Why did you decide the date by yourself?"

"No worries. Comrade Aihara's swimming lessons fall on Mondays and Fridays, and I deliberately avoided the dates of Mafuyu's checkups. Young man should not have any special plans for the summer holidays, right?"

"What did you say?"

"Do you have anything planned?"

No, I don't. Sorry for that. Then again, how did that person

manage to find out about our schedules for the summer holidays in such great detail?

"Nao, don't you want to participate? It's at the beach, you know? The beach!"

Chiaki said that enthusiastically as she repeatedly stepped on the pedals of the bass drum. I took another look at the photo of the villa. A training camp huh..... There'd be no adults around us, and we'd be in control of our time from morning till night—we could hold practices, have impromptu performances, and even play with fireworks at night. Seems pretty interesting..... No wait, hold on a second!

"Look, Senpai. You said you've already borrowed a villa, and that means there'll only be the four of us there, right?"

"Yeah! No caretakers. No rental fees. Though in return, we do have to clean up the villa."

"And that means we'll have to take care of our own food as well?"

"But of course."

Even though deep inside me, I already knew it would be pointless to ask, I still gave it a shot anyway.

"..... Senpai, do you know how to cook?"

Senpai shook her head as she flashed a slight smile. I sighed. Chiaki was totally hopeless at cooking, and with Mafuyu's fingers in that state.....

"From what I've heard from Comrade Aihara, it seems you are quite adept at cooking, since you've been living together with your father for a long period of time. I'll be looking forward to it."

Ah, whatever. I'm the one who cooks the three meals when I'm at home during the holidays anyway. Though the portions have increased to four, the time and effort spent cooking would be the same as before. Moreover, if we were at the beach, even a simple bento would taste delicious.

Oh, are we gonna swim? Will they be wearing swimsuits? I've only seen Chiaki in the swimwear designated by the school. Senpai has a really good figure, so she may bring along something really flashy?

As for Mafuyu, she doesn't even attend the swimming lessons..... No wait, calm down, me! We are going there to practice, not to swim and suntan ourselves!

Then, I realized something—Mafuyu hadn't said a single word. She was sitting on the desk and staring at the training camp handout, clutching it tightly with her hands. The expression on her face suggested that she was troubled by something. The guitar at her chest was about to slip down her knees.

"..... Comrade Ebisawa? What's wrong? Are the dates inconvenient for you?"

Mafuyu shook her head in reply to Senpai's question.

"If it's inconvenient for you, do tell me about it."

"It is nothing. Let's continue our practice."

After murmuring that in response, she stuffed the handout in the pocket of her guitar case, then grabbed the neck of her guitar. So there's really something bothering her? Does she not want to go to the training camp at the beach?

Kagurazaka-senpai didn't press any further either, and took out her own guitar as well.

I recalled that day—the things that happened on the day Mafuyu returned from America. The procedures for Mafuyu joining the club were completed in the female restroom at the Narita airport.

Back then, I was outside on lookout duty. What sort of expression was on Mafuyu's face when she signed the club application form? What did they talk about? I had absolutely no idea.

After returning to class, Mafuyu still wore a grumpy expression on her face, just like before; and she was as defensive as ever when it came to interacting with the rest of our classmates. Those classmates of mine, despite knowing about Mafuyu's fingers, still treated her as they did before she went to America, teasing her like she was some wild cat wary of humans.

Everything that happened before seemed like an illusion. Nothing had changed. The only difference was that Mafuyu had started to participate in club activities with us.

"Naomi, there's too much syncopation. It feels really uncomfortable."

"Naomi, stop being led away by my shuffle rhythms. Play your quavers properly."

During our practice, Mafuyu only complained about me—though part of the reason was because I was the person with the lousiest technique.

During these two weeks, the number of conversations between Mafuyu and I increased, though most of them were about things related to music, so I still didn't have the slightest idea about what Mafuyu was thinking when she was together with the band.

Notes

1. I usually skip the -san and -chan, but just so you know, he calls Mafuyu without any honorific

Chapter 2 - Problems Between the Two

The next morning, Mafuyu reached the classroom slightly later than me. The expression on her face seemed slightly complicated. After stealing a glance at me, she sat down at her seat and fixed her gaze on her table.

"Nao. Nao."

Class-rep Terada and a bunch of girls who were following her came up to me. She then asked,

"Help me say 'Good morning' to the Princess. Then tell her it's basic courtesy for her to greet others in the morning."

"You tell her that yourself." Also, we sit next to each other, so Mafuyu probably heard you, yeah?

"It just seems like the Princess isn't in a good mood today. Or rather, she can't say what's on her mind."

"Hey, did Nao quarrel with her again? Or did something happen?"

The reason why everyone addressed Mafuyu as "Princess," and why it was my job to relay messages to her on behalf of the class—I'll avoid explaining it, since it's slightly complicated. But in short, Mafuyu was still as unsociable as ever—so why's the group of girls led by Terada still worrying about her? Are my classmates a bunch of saints? Well, it's not like I'm in a position to ask that.

In the end, I didn't manage to strike a conversation with Mafuyu, who was giving off a gloomy aura. The first person who got close to Mafuyu that day was actually Chiaki, who managed to dash into the classroom before the preparatory bell rang.

"Good morning! Morning to you too, Mafu-Mafu!"

Chiaki's seat was in front of me, so she gave us both a tap on our shoulders as she walked past our desks.

"Hey, listen to me. I told my mother about the training camp

yesterday. She said that, since we don't need to pay for accommodations, I'll actually have to cover the rest of the expenses using my own pocket money. Isn't she just terrible? Therefore Nao, please choose food that's both cheap and delicious!"

"Ah. I haven't told Tetsurou anything yet. Somehow, it feels like that fella will just yak about it for half a day."

Tetsurou was my father, in principle, but because he lacked any life skills, I was more like his guardian instead. Though it'd only be for three days and two nights, conditions at my house would become really bad without me around.

"I told my mother that Nao would be coming along as well, and she agreed immediately. What about Mafu-Mafu?"

Mafuyu's shoulders flinched when the conversation landed on her. She remained silent for a while, and kept staring at a corner of her desk. She then finally said her first sentence of the day.

"..... Papa says I'm forbidden from staying overnight outside."

Chiaki and I exchanged looks for a moment. Then, I shifted my gaze to Mafuyu's side profile.

I see. Ebichiri gets excessively protective when it comes to things regarding his daughter. He probably couldn't bring himself to allow his high-school daughter to spend the night outside? Mafuyu was probably crestfallen because of that. To be honest, I was slightly surprised, as Mafuyu didn't seem too keen about the training camp.

"Really? Wow, your father's really strict! What should we do then? We'll just continue with the three of us then?" Chiaki looked at me as she asked that.

"You can't!"

The sudden outburst from Mafuyu caused not only Chiaki and me, but also the entire class, to jump in shock and turn our heads around. Mafuyu stood up. I didn't know if it was because she noticed my gaze, but her face flushed red in an instant. She then bit her lip hard and sat back down.

I didn't know what I did to make her angry again, so I tried coming up with something to say. But just then, the guys approached me.

"What's all this talk about a training camp? Nao, you better explain this."

"That's right. You're obligated to explain things properly."

"I'll never allow something that enviable—like how you club members are going on a training camp together—to happen."

Ah~ this group of busybodies is coming over yet again. It seemed like my classmates had been directing their attention to our conversation the whole time. Do you guys have a little too much time on your hands or something?

"Where are you guys going for your training camp?"

"The beach! And we're gonna stay at a villa that looks like a gingerbread house." Chiaki answered before I could stop her. At the same time, I could feel the atmosphere around me heat up in an instant.

"Beach? Did you say beach? The Folk Music Research Club's going to the beach together? You gotta be kidding."

"W-Wait a second! Nao, I'll join your club right now."

"I'll lend you my digital camera, so remember to take pictures of them in their swimsuits!"

"Nao, I beg you, please hire me as the errand boy for the club."

Just as I was about to chase away the group of excited boys inching closer and closer to my seat, the bell for class finally rang. And with that, our teacher stepped into the classroom.



"That's quite a problem we have here."

It was rare for all four of us to gather immediately in the practice room right after class. Kagurazaka-senpai crossed her arms and said,

"Ebisawa Chisato should be flying off to Boston for a recording during the period of our training camp, so I thought things would just work out from there."

"How did you know?" The originally silent and grumpy Mafuyu

suddenly lifted her head and asked.

"Well, I can get my hands on that sort of information if it concerns my beloved comrades. For now, let's just lock our sights on the period of time that Ebisawa Chisato isn't in Japan, and plan our schedules according to that."

As expected of Senpai, her preparations are incredibly thorough—though I don't quite feel that has anything to do with love, as she said. No, wait a second! Senpai, are you planning to go ahead with the training camp despite not obtaining Ebichiri's approval?

"There's no point in asking him. If he knew his daughter was staying overnight outside, that guy would definitely abandon his recording in a flash to get Mafuyu back."

I recalled the incident last month—that father had even cancelled a concert at the last minute. If he heard about his daughter staying overnight outside, he would definitely abandon all his scheduled recordings.

"I'm fine..... you three can go by yourselves."

"Didn't you just yell 'You can't!' not too long ago?"

"T-T-That's because....."

Mafuyu glared at me with her face flushed red. She then shook her head vigorously. What exactly does she want?

"There's no point in us dumping Comrade Ebisawa and going to the training camp by ourselves. We can only practice when the four of us are there together."

Mafuyu lowered her head after hearing Senpai's words.

I suddenly thought of something: perhaps it has nothing to do with her father allowing her to participate in the training camp or not, but, instead, she herself might not be interested in joining us? Somehow, it felt like that was how it really was, judging from Mafuyu's expressions ever since we brought up the training camp yesterday.

Chiaki clapped her hands together and said, "I know! Why don't we just hold the training camp at Mafu-Mafu's house?"

Mafuyu shot an ice-cold glare in Chiaki's direction, a glare cold enough to freeze the cries of the cicadas. Kagurazaka-senpai said

nothing, and instead, patted Chiaki's head as she said "There, there." She actually didn't tsukkomi her—so Senpai can actually be quite considerate sometimes.

"I guess we have no choice. I've miscalculated this time. I'll try to come up with something, even though we're quite tight on time."

"What do you mean..... by 'something'?"

Having noticed the sinister smile appearing on Senpai's face, I had a bad feeling about all this.

"Hmm? I can't say it now. Hey, didn't I say it before? All I'm doing is sowing the seeds. I myself don't know where the seeds will land, how they will sprout, or what colors the blooming flowers will be."

Those might sound like the lyrics of some song, but she really wasn't joking.

A few days later, I saw the flowers that bloomed from the seeds that Senpai had sowed, and I couldn't help but be shocked by the results.



It happened on a Friday. The first semester was about to end, so the onslaught of after-class remedial courses burned up all my time; I didn't even have time left to attend the club. After school, the setting sun looked like it was being cooked in the sky. I walked back home wearily, while being grilled by the rays of the burning sun. When I reached my house, I saw a large foreign-made car parked in our garage.

No wait—I remember seeing it somewhere before?

I didn't have a good feeling about this, so I opened the door gently. My dad was a music critic who never cleaned anything; he was also ranked the world's number six hopeless man. Because of him, the entrance and the walkway were filled with unsorted CDs and records. However, as I carefully walked into the house, I noticed I wasn't being greeted by a blast of classical music coming from the living room. Instead, it was replaced by the sounds of a conversation. There's someone else in there other than Tetsurou? It had been months since we had a guest here in the house.

"I'm bac—k....."

I pulled open the door and was rendered speechless by the scene.

"So you're back, Nao? Help me brew a cup of coffee, and add in extra brandy. Give this guy here a cup of plum-kelp tea. Oh right, Ebichiri, why must you always choose <Variations on a Theme by Joseph Haydn> for all of your encores? I feel like sleeping when I hear that. Choose <Academic Festival Overture> for your next performance instead!"

Tetsurou was still the same as usual—he was dressed in sweatpants and a jersey, and was sitting cross-legged lazily on the sofa. Opposite of him was Ebisawa Chisato, who had an irritated expression on his face. He was wearing a black-colored sweater and well-ironed suit pants. Even though his attire was slightly more casual, his hairstyle was still the same as a lion's mane, as frequently seen on his CD covers—yup, it was Ebichiri all right.

"Sorry for disturbing." He greeted me, but I took a step back unconsciously.

"H-Haa..... Welcome."

"Nao, go make the coffee, quickly." Tetsurou ordered me without even looking at me; that made me want to slam my fist into the back of his head. "Even if he's a guest performer, you can't just allow him to choose the pieces as he pleases. Or are you implying that, since it's an encore, you can just play according to your personal preference?"

"If you do not like it, you can always leave before the encore. The publisher pays for your concert tickets anyway. Isn't that right?"

"Whoa, Nao, did you hear that? Did you hear that? This person here is actually saying something like that to his audience."

What does that have to do with me? I escaped into the kitchen without a second thought.

I tried to grasp hold of the situation while waiting for the water to boil. Why is Ebichiri here at my house?

Even though he was an old acquaintance of Tetsurou's, it was still hard for me to believe that those two had actually graduated from the College of Music in the same year. Ebichiri exuded the aura and

dignity of a maestro, and fully exemplified the word "seasoned," which was often used to describe him. In comparison, if I were to lie and say that Tetsurou had been repeating his years in college all the way up till now, everyone may just believe me and give him pitiful stares.

When I brought them their cups of coffee, their conversation was becoming even more heated.

"All you know how to do is break up the music you've listened to, and savor it in bits and pieces, so what's with those haughty words? What I emphasize is the coherence of the rhythm of the music! The pause in-between the movements is not there for me to clear my throat!"

"Shut up, snobbish conductor! You just copied Furtwängler for your take on Brahms' [**<Symphony No. 4 in E minor>**](#), didn't you? You can't just emphasize the ending and think it'll be great just like that. Nao, that's how you feel as well after listening to that, right?"

Hey, stop dragging me into this already!

"Right, I want to hear your opinion too. You're the one who wrote the commentary for my 'Complete Collection of Brahms' Symphonies,' right?"

I nearly spilled the cup of coffee in front of Ebichiri. W-Why does he know about this?

"What's with that surprised reaction of yours? Probably all my close friends know about it already. Because I feel really proud about it."

"Ehhhhhhhhhh?"

I immediately hugged the tray and squatted down.

I sometimes helped Tetsurou write music critiques and CD commentaries because I wanted to earn some pocket money. Of course, in order to hide the truth, I specifically mimicked Tetsurou's writing style. Damn you! Don't let others know! Your credibility will fall if you do that, right!?

"You are a critic as well, so you should have differing views from Hikawa, right? Hikawa always wrote critiques that strayed from the main topic—he thought it was unnecessary for me to emphasize the

agogic accents and dynamics at the same time."

"Since when do I go off-topic!? Your ring finger will move along when you try to move your little finger, right? See, it's something like that. You've mixed your agogic accents and your dynamics together. Nao, you tell him too."

"Urm..... What exactly are agogic accents?"

I was just a first-year high school student, so I still had to research my way through a huge pile of information when I wrote my drafts. It'll be a huge headache for me if you guys start spewing out a string of musical terms at me.

"Probably the rhythmic version of the dynamics," Tetsurou answered.

"..... And what are dynamics?"

"The sound intensity version of agogic accents," was Ebichiri's explanation. Who the heck would understand that!? That's like saying "the right hand is the reverse of the left hand"—you guys might as well not bother with those circular explanations!

"Well..... I feel that Eugene Ormandy conducted better for Brahms' <Symphony no. 4>....."

"Mmm. I tried to replicate the way he made the strings play an octave higher—it was quite interesting. Only the Germans would complain that it was not German enough' anyway."

"I'll say that too! Speaking of which, that sounds really interesting. So you've actually done something like that before? At which concert did you do it? Boston's? Did you record it? What a pity. I could've criticized it with all my might if it had been released on CD."

Great, I successfully managed to divert the topic. Just as I was about to escape the living room, a voice called out behind me.

"Ah, hold on a second. The reason I came here today was to talk to you about something."

I froze for a full two seconds before turning around slowly.

"..... Eh?" My voice cracked.

"Hikawa, I'm sorry, but can you please leave us alone for a moment? I wish to speak to him in private."

"Hey, wait....." Tetsurou was much more surprised than I was. "Hold on, what do you want to discuss with Nao? It can't be that you want his hand in marriage? That won't do. To me, Nao's someone who replaces the role of my wife, you know?"

"Tetsurou, just shut up and scram for now....." "I get it already, so just move aside for a while, Hikawa."

With two people giving him the cold shoulder at the same time, Tetsurou could only pick up his coffee mug and stand up gloomily. He made his way to the kitchen while whistling <E Lucevan le Stelle>. I remembered there was a line in the song that went something like 'I don't wanna die in despair!' or something like that..... This guy, he always managed to make people feel uncomfortable. ^[1]

To be honest though, despite how irritating Tetsurou could be, I did hope that he wouldn't go away. I sat before Ebichiri; it felt so awkward I dared not even raise my head. What does he want to talk to me about..... Something that concerns Mafuyu? I couldn't think of anything else.

"You—" Ebichiri put down the mug and began to speak, "have written quite a few articles about me. It has been a while since I've returned to Japan, so I knew nothing about them at all."



"Right....."

Speaking of why I was always writing articles about him, it was all because Tetsurou hated writing critiques dealing with Ebisawa

Chisato. It was probably because many people knew they were classmates during their high school and college days, so he must've found it quite troublesome to write them. In order not to receive any jobs that involved Ebisawa Chisato, Tetsurou had deliberately nicknamed him "Ebichiri," and critiqued him in a joking manner. However, that plan backfired, and the critique was well-received. Thanks to him, I was frequently tasked with the job of writing about Ebichiri.

Despite all that, that was still my first time speaking face to face with someone whom I had critiqued. I was in a cold sweat due to my nervousness.

"Truthfully speaking, I do not really have the habit of reading these sorts of articles. However, someone mailed me some articles about me a few days ago. At the end of all the articles was Hikawa Tetsurou's name. But despite that, the sender had carefully pointed out the difference between your articles and Hikawa Tetsurou's."

Ebichiri then proceeded to list the titles of a few columns and critiques—they were indeed written by me. All I could do was stare at my knees and not move an inch.

"There is no need for you to be that tense. You write much better than your father."

"What the hell, damn you—" came the voice of Tetsurou from the kitchen. He sure has a sharp pair of ears—there was no point asking him to leave us. However, Ebichiri and I continued to ignore Tetsurou's presence.

"However, it doesn't seem like Tetsurou is the one who sent those things to me..... Was it you?"

"Eh? No way, I wouldn't do that."

Ebichiri tilted his head. Seemed like he was pretty surprised. If Tetsurou wasn't the one who did it, then who could have done such a thing? Someone in the music circle who had too much free time on his hands?

"Forget it. I came here because I wanted to speak with you anyway, since I won't be staying in Japan for too long."

Eh? It can't be that we're gonna discuss music next, right? No no,

please spare me from that— just as I was thinking that, Ebichiri suddenly spoke rather stiffly.

"We'll leave those critiques for another day. Actually..... my reason for coming here is to talk about Mafuyu."

Ah—Indeed.

"Urm..... I'm really sorry about what happened back then."

"It's alright. It's all in the past already. Moreover, after that incident, Mafuyu began speaking to me occasionally."

I see..... Well, typically speaking, Mafuyu only speaks "occasionally." So if she talks to you, then that's really something occasional out of the "occasionally."

"However, I still do not have any idea what my daughter is thinking. But, she is now willing to go to the hospital to continue her treatments, and she no longer runs away from home as she pleases, like she used to."

"Isn't that good?"

"But she ignores me when I ask her if she still wants to play the piano."

Piano—huh?

It was something Mafuyu had lost, and for now, she was still planning not to touch it again.

"If Mafuyu's fingers can recover, then it is obvious that I hope she returns to the music scene as a pianist. Since the primary cause of her illness is psychological, if she is willing to pick up the piano again, then perhaps, she can make a complete recovery much faster. You think the same as well, right?"

"Eh..... Ah..... No....."

I lifted my head in surprise. A sincere expression appeared on Ebichiri's stony face.

"Actually, I did tell her that I wished to hear her play the piano again."

Ah, I said it. Ebichiri almost leaned right before me.

"Mmm, however, Mafuyu never—I mean, Mafuyu-san never

answered me at all. She didn't say a single word." ^[2]

I nearly addressed Mafuyu directly by her name while talking to Ebichiri. Ebichiri crossed his arms in front of his chest and let out a sigh.

"Your situation is much better than mine already. She'll lock herself in her room if I mention a word about it."

"I..... see."

So I guess the knot created in her heart over the years, wasn't something that could be undone that easily.

"I'm actually saying that with her well-being in mind, but that girl just cannot understand."

I couldn't help but feel that the words of all the parents in the world were all the same. Almost no parents would act without the well-being of their children in mind, but despite that, they can't successfully convey those feelings to their children. I experienced something like this before when I was six. After divorcing Tetsurou, my mother said something to that effect before she left home: "Leave with me! It's for your own sake." That was what Misako had said to me.

Tetsurou never said anything like that, and that was one of the reasons why I stayed in this house.

"All that girl tells me are..... things about the band."

I was deep in thought when Ebichiri's words suddenly jolted my head upwards.

"I have asked her many things about school, like if she is getting along well with her classmates and etc. However, all that girl talks about are things related to you."

I swallowed hard. Things related to me? I really couldn't imagine Mafuyu talking to someone else about things that have to do with me.

"Well, it feels strange to be asking you this but..... what is Mafuyu like when she is at school?"

"Eh? What is she like huh....."

Though I understood what Ebichiri was trying to ask, I didn't know

how to answer him.

"It's not like Mafuyu.....-san and I get along really well. We hardly talk in class, and even if we do, it's about things related to guitars or the band."

"Is—that so? Strange. You and Mafuyu should be rather close, no? I mean, she did come over to your house when she ran away from home, didn't she?"

"Eh, ehhhh?"

Do Mafuyu and I seem really close to each other? Objectively speaking, that may very well be the case.

"What exactly is the relationship between you two? Did something happen between you and Mafuyu when both of you ran away from home.....?"

"I said nothing happened, alright!?"

His gaze was really scary, and caused me to jump in fright and hide behind the sofa. With that, Ebichiri cleared his throat and continued,

"In any case, she should be more willing to talk if the person she is talking to is you, right?"

"No..... It's definitely not as you think."

I slumped into the sofa. Part of what I had just said was a lie. When both of us were running away from home, Mafuyu had more or less talked to me a bit about things that had to do with piano and her parents. I was probably the first person Mafuyu had said all those things to, right?

Those were things Mafuyu could only talk about when she was away from her father's side, so I couldn't tell her father about all those things at a time like this.

"I see..... then if so....." Ebichiri directed his line of sight to the coffee mug. "If so—then I probably can't ask for your help anymore. I really do want to know what Mafuyu is thinking, but as her father, it is really embarrassing to have to ask someone for favors like this."

So why are you asking this favor of me? This is the problem between you and your daughter, yeah? Though that was what I was

thinking, I couldn't say anything after I saw the distressed expression on Ebichiri's face.

Just then, Tetsurou's voice came from the kitchen again.

"Are you an idiot? The only way to deal with a daughter like that is to leave her alone, till she feels like talking!"

Ebichiri shot a fierce gaze towards the entrance of the kitchen.

"I already told you before—you have to give your child more space. Ah, right, how about having her marry into our family? She's about to hit sixteen soon, right? It's about time for me to get Nao a new mother....."

"Tetsurou, just shut up!" "Hikawa, don't interrupt us!"

Tetsurou snorted, then began whistling again. It was Mozart's [**<La Finta Giardiniera>**](#)—"Even if you reject me, my heart will never change." Damn, he's irritating.^[3]

However, I did feel it was exactly as Tetsurou said, and Ebichiri should've realized it long ago, right? Though he probably couldn't allow himself to do nothing, even if he knew the only thing he could do was wait for Mafuyu to speak of her own accord. I guess that's how all parents are?

The uncomfortable silence persisted for quite a while. I couldn't help but sneak a peek at Ebichiri's face. I guess I should just say something? Even if I said the same thing Tetsurou did, he probably wouldn't accept it anyway. Moreover, if he could hold back till Mafuyu decided to speak of her own accord, he wouldn't have come down here. Then again, he could've just made an excuse, saying he was here to praise my well-written critiques.

..... Hmm? Excuses?

"—Ah!"

Ebichiri lifted his head upon hearing the strange sound I made.

"You want to say something?"

"Eh? Ah, no, nothing."

I waved my hands to brush that aside. I then clenched my fist, lowered my head and got lost in deep thought. So that's what's happening here? So you're saying I should do this?

I hesitated for a while, then spoke.

"Urm..... I will try speaking with Mafuyu again, but I may not be able to understand what she is thinking. I will tell her honestly that you are really worried about her, and will try to convince her to have a good chat with her father. Will that do?"

The edges of Ebichiri's lips slackened just a little, and he slowly nodded his head twice.

"That's good."

"Is that so? But....." I wet my lips a little. "I can't talk to her about those things at school, as summer vacation is about to start soon."

"Hmm?"

"Mmm, which means..... I think—at the training camp, I may have an opportunity to talk to her about it."

Ebichiri's unwilling expression was bared for all to see. The reason Mafuyu was so easy to read was probably because she inherited that trait from her father?

"But that means staying outside." Well, that's how training camps are supposed to be. "And I did say before, you people are just high-school students, right? Moreover, Mafuyu's fingers are an inconvenience, and her mental state isn't too stable right now. That is just pushing it."

"That's why..... I feel it's not good for us to keep pushing her like this—she may become even more stubborn instead. Should you allow her to participate in the training camp, then maybe—she may slowly voice her feelings."

I chose my words carefully as I secretly peered at Ebichiri's stiff face. I wanted Mafuyu to go to the training camp as well; she was the final member whom we had spent so much effort looking for.

"Why a rock band? I really do not get it." Ebichiri continued on unpleasantly, "I can understand her wanting to be away from the piano for a while, but why did she choose to play the electric guitar?"

I sank into a moment of silence. What caused her to pick up the electric guitar? I don't know either. I had originally thought it was just an outlet for her to escape from the piano; however, that didn't really

seem to be the case.

If so—

"..... You dislike rock?"

It was only after I had asked that question that I felt really embarrassed. I was actually directing that question to a conductor who was acknowledged by just about everyone in this world? However, Ebichiri's answer proved to be rather surprising as well.

"I am not arrogant to the point that I can answer that question."

"..... Eh?"

"Regardless of whether it is 'rock' or 'classical music,' those are just labels that record companies and music stores use to allow easier identification and classification on the CD racks. Am I not right? You should know very well that it is dangerous for one to critique a piece of music based on the composer alone, right? Even though they were both roughly from the same era, the Beethoven who wrote <The Symphony of Destiny> was a different person from the Beethoven who wrote <Pastoral Symphony>. If that applies even to pieces from the same person of the same era, then it applies even more so for the countless pieces of music created by thousands of different people. Don't you think it would be arrogant if I were to just point my finger at a certain rack—sorted and classified by some record company for the sake of convenience—and say whether I like it or not?"

Well..... It may really be just as he said.....

"I have never heard music that you generally classify as 'rock,' so there is nothing more for me to talk about. I can only say—I do not know."

He doesn't know. This person here doesn't know the place his own daughter is currently at—is that what he's trying to say?

If that's the case—

I stood up, made my way to the sound system, and proceeded to dig something out of the stacks of cassettes. There was only the date [7/6] written on the label of the cassette.

It was the day the band was officially formed by the four of us.

I placed the cassette into the deck and pressed the play button. I could then hear a series of muffled background noises, among which contained Senpai's breath, as well as feedback from the guitar. Next was Chiaki counting down by hitting her drum sticks four times. I was once again pulled back in time, to the afternoon on the sixth of July.

There were the heavy beats of the bass drum. The heat waves, as well as the deep bass, filled the poorly air-conditioned room. My fingers played out the pulses of the music. I shut my eyes, and the various scenes replayed in my mind: the reflection of the cymbals flashing through the faint darkness; the flushed face of Chiaki, who was sitting behind the drum set; to my left, the black hair of Kagurazaka-senpai swaying along with the rhythm; and to my right, the maroon-colored hair of Mafuyu, which seemed like it was giving off a faint golden shimmer. It was as if Senpai's riffs had split open the sands of the desert—Mafuyu's Stratocaster replied to Senpai's singing by playing out the fanfare of the song.

It was Led Zeppelin's <Kashmir>.

This was the song that lit me ablaze, that marked the beginning of my time with two other people.

If only Mafuyu were around—that was my honest wish back then, and the main reason why I fought.

On the sixth of July, that wish of mine finally came true. That was the first band practice after Mafuyu joined the Folk Music Research Club. There was no conversation or any other sort of exchange—that song alone was enough to suck us all in. Mafuyu should never have heard the song before, but despite that, the moment just before the end of Senpai's preludes, Mafuyu darted into the song. Her distinct and strong tunes seemed to have shattered my heart; they lit the practice room ablaze.

Those were no longer the sounds of the old Mafuyu, who cooped herself up in the room to play piano pieces. Even though they were still as prickly as ever, those sharp spikes no longer chased away anyone who tried to get close to her. Instead, they pierced deep into the hearts of others, and transferred her passion directly into them.

The four of us were one. In that short instant that Senpai and I

exchanged sights, we could see that both of us were thinking the exact same thing. Our left and right hand were finally together.

For Mafuyu, this was not a place for her to escape to.

I placed my hands on the speakers and pulled my consciousness away from the practice room shrouded in heat, back to my living room.

The song was over. After the cassette stopped with a *pa*, I remained standing in front of the sound system, and for a while, I couldn't move. It was because I could still feel the heat on my face.

I turned my head around and saw Ebichiri supporting his forehead with his hands, his face half-buried in them. I let out a sigh. Is that still not enough for him to understand? I somehow thought that, as fellow musicians, he would be able to understand it.

Just as I was timidly making my way back to the sofa, Ebichiri spoke, with his eyes still closed.

"..... Were you the one who played the D, G and A notes? The bass part requires no technique whatsoever."

"Eh..... Ah, y-yeah. You're right." Well, I suck at playing, so sorry about that.

"No, that should be the correct way to play. In addition, it also seemed like Mafuyu's guitar was specially tuned to the other guitar..... I guess that was the reason why the harmony sounded so good."

I opened my eyes in surprise. Just as Ebichiri had said, <Kashmir> employed an unconventional tuning method, making use of the guitar's DADGAD. He figured that out after listening to it only once? I had originally thought he was just a silly dad who was overprotective of Mafuyu, but I guess he proved his worth as a conductor.

This time, Ebichiri placed his hands around his mouth, and stared in the direction of the sound system for quite a while. Fearfully, I stole a peek at the expression on his face. Did my plan backfire.....?

"Is this..... the place Mafuyu is currently at?"

I heard him mutter that to himself. I really heard that.

Then, Ebichiri heaved a sigh.

"I am still not too certain, since all of you are still in high-school. Look, is the president of your club someone dependable?"

"Eh? Ah, yeah, she is dependable." My pitch went upwards unintentionally. Even if my mouth were torn apart, I would definitely not tell him our president was the one who took Mafuyu away at the airport. "Don't worry. She is someone who is really dependable. Not only has she gained the trust of all the teachers, she knows how to take care of others as well. Furthermore, her relationship with Mafuyu is pretty good too."

I slipped in a lie or two without hesitation—in actual fact, none of the teachers trusted Senpai at all.

"As it was something decided at the last minute, we didn't manage to obtain approval from the school. Senpai was the one who found the place for us to stay as well. Still....."

"If you're still worried, how about I follow them along? Not only am I dependable, I'm really good at taking care of others as well." Tetsurou's voice came from the kitchen yet again, but Ebichiri and I ignored him completely.

"..... I understand. There is no choice then."

"I will leave the things regarding Mafuyu in your hands. Please try to talk to her about it."

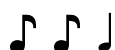
"R-Right."

I cautiously shook Ebichiri's outstretched hands. An overly relieved me sank into the sofa—it felt like my back was melting. That's really great.

However, what Ebichiri said next made me swallow my sigh of relief.

"—Right, you've addressed Mafuyu by her name quite a few times just now. Is that how you usually address her? What exactly is the relationship between you two?"

Eh? Oh dammmmmmmn!



I tried to come up with all sorts of excuses, but it took quite a bit of

effort to finally send Ebichiri away. After ensuring the foreign-made car had disappeared past the end of the road, I took out my handphone, and saw an incoming call from Senpai. So she was just about to call me as well huh?

"So Ebisawa Chisato went back already?"

On the other side of the phone was the slightly apologetic voice of Senpai.

"So it was indeed Senpai who sent Ebisawa Chisato those stacks of critiques?"

I couldn't help but mix in a sigh with my voice.

"Mmm, but I didn't expect him to visit you that quickly. Sorry for not informing you about it earlier."

"Nah, it's fine. I successfully resolved everything anyway. It seems Mafuyu will finally be able to attend the training camp."

I suddenly regretted telling her that over the phone, because what followed was a strange silence. I really wished I could've seen the surprised expression on Senpai's face with my very own eyes.

"..... I'm thinking if I should convert the emotional feelings in me into a song and sing it to you right now! Still, you managed to understand my thoughts despite me not saying anything. Don't you think you're really impressive?"

No Senpai, you're the one who's impressive, for coming up with the idea of sending Ebichiri my articles. Then again, those were the seeds sowed by Kagurazaka-senpai; I just happened to figure out what I needed to do next in order to smoothly navigate through the crisis, and carried out some necessary countermeasures.

"If that's the case, I can focus on the composition of the songs. I hope to come up with six original songs by the time training camp ends. Well, we do have fifty minutes for our performance."

"..... What did you just say about fifty minutes?"

"Because we're going to perform with two other bands, so we need fifty minutes."

Urm..... What exactly is going on here?

"It's our band's live performance! The date was just decided not

too long ago. It's going to be on the fourth of August."

Dooo, the voice of Senpai disappeared. I dropped my handphone on the sofa just as my brain froze. Live? Did she just say a live performance?

Notes

1. Line's probaby '*E muoio disperato!*', which is '*Alas I die despairing!*'
2. Well, being Japanese and all, MC felt it was overly intimate to address Mafuyu without the honorific when speaking to her father, so he added the -san. Just so you know. He'll be doing this in the future as well when he talks to Ebichiri, so keep this in mind.
3. *La Finta Giardiniera* is an opera by Mozart. Not too sure which aria the line is from, but based on [this site](#), it should be from *Va Pure Ad Altri In Braccio*.

Chapter 3 - The Reason to Stay Here

It was said that Kagurazaka Kyouko had been in three different bands before she even reached the age of sixteen.

The first band was formed with her fellow club members during her first year of middle school. The bassist was a guy who planned to play through songs only strumming a single string, while the drummer couldn't even desynchronize his hands and his feet. To solve that, Kagurazaka Kyouko thought up an ingenious arrangement, asking the girl who was supposed to be the lead singer to help out with the snare drums on the side. However, the girl complained, saying she couldn't sing if she did that. So, Kagurazaka-senpai took over and became the lead singer instead—she practiced really hard on the three Green Day songs they had chosen for the performance. However, the day before the school's anniversary, the girl said she wanted to sing as well, and accused Kyouko of being sly; the girl ended up not coming for the rehearsal. The bassist and the drummer sided with the girl and blamed Kyouko as well. On the day of the performance, Kagurazaka Kyouko went up on stage with her guitar by herself, and began her solo act with [**<Desperado>**](#) by the Eagles. Even though her performance was very well received, the band was dissolved the very same day.

The second band was formed during the summer of her second year of middle school. It was a disco ensemble that consisted of all girls. Kyouko joined the band because she was intrigued by a recruitment poster they had posted up at the live house she frequented. The band had advertised itself using the phrase "The Michael Jackson of Gospel Rock," and she was attracted by the weird but interesting concept that was written there. So even though she was slightly concerned about the age difference between herself and the rest of the band members, she still applied. Surprisingly, she was extremely popular with the rest of the members, and they immediately decided to hold a live performance. However, during

one of the celebration parties, it was revealed that Kagurazaka Kyouko frequented the houses of the various members to spend the night, and had even bathed and slept together with them. With that, the gathering turned into a messy fight that even the fans got involved in. The only person who escaped from all that was the very person in question, who happened to be in a sober state back then. The band was dismissed the very next day as well.

The third band was formed after she had just been promoted to her third year of middle school. She was invited to join the band by the shop assistant of the music store she frequented. The rest of the three members were all guys, and the average age of the band members was very high—one of them was already married. However, the band performed mostly British hard rock, which she had happened to be obsessed with at the time, so she immediately agreed to join. However, that band was dissolved after three months.



"..... And that means the Folk Music Research Club is your fourth?"

"Wait, hold on a second. Don't just skip the important part and be done with it." Sitting opposite of Senpai, I quickly asked, "Why did the third band dissolve?"

As I had raised my voice unintentionally, everyone at the McDonalds—including Chiaki, who was sitting next to me, as well as Mafuyu, who was diagonally in front of me—stared at me.

"Hmm? I can't tell you about the third band. Oh right, you know about Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store, don't you? The place I'm working at now. The owner of that store was one of the three members of the band, and the incident concerns his reputation."

I couldn't help but feel a chill run through my body. I then thought of Senpai's impossibly expensive guitar. According to Chiaki, Senpai managed to obtain it by discovering the weakness of the owner and threatening him with it. That can't be related to the dissolving of the third band, right?

"I'm more concerned about the second band." Chiaki bit the straw

in her cola and said furiously, "Senpai, you've laid your hands on way too many girls already!"

"Mmm, I'm reflecting on that too. Well, I didn't do my homework properly back then, so I never thought that having a lesbian relationship would result in infringing the Immorality Act as well." That has nothing to do with the Immorality Act, yeah!? Man, this person..... why do her conversations always go in that direction?

Because the third years had make-up lessons and exams today, we were unable to hold practice. So, on our way home, the four of us stopped by McDonalds together. Even though Senpai said she would be talking about the live performance, the things we chatted about were all unrelated to that and full of rubbish. That was quite worrying for the members of the newly formed band.

"Anyway, in order to allow the band to steadily make its way towards success, I decided on three things. First, if I am to be in another band, I must definitely start it myself."

And with that, Senpai looked at all of us. This was the first time she had gathered the four members of the band from scratch. Since Senpai's an idealist, I don't think it'd be a good idea for her to join someone else's band anyway.

"Second, the male-to-female ratio of the band. The first was 2:2, the second was 0:4, and the third was 3:1—and they all failed. Since I myself am a girl, the only remaining option left was to form a band with three girls and one guy."

"..... So you invited me to join the band because of a stupid reason like that?"

After hearing me say that with a dumbfounded expression on my face, Senpai cocked her eyebrows.

"That's not a stupid reason, and that's not the only reason either. I told you already, right?"

Well, she isn't wrong. This person seems to be serious about just about everything, but is there really any relationship between the male-to-female ratio of a band and the band's survival?

"Lastly, the final person to join the band has to come up with the name of the band."

Senpai took a look at Mafuyu, who was sitting next to her. Up until then, Mafuyu had kept silent the whole time, staring at the dry fries. But when she heard Senpai say that, she lifted her head up in shock.

"..... M-Me?"

"Yes." Senpai grabbed Mafuyu's hand with her own two hands.

"W-Why?"

Mafuyu was confused, and I was too. Why must Mafuyu be the one to come up with the name?

Senpai took the box of fries.

"This is me....." Senpai grabbed a fry and placed it on the tray. "Followed by Comrade Aihara....." She looked at Chiaki briefly, then picked out another fry, and placed it side by side with the first. "Next is young man....." She grabbed a third, slightly shorter fry. "And finally Comrade Ebisawa." Senpai then chose the longest fry of the lot. After spending some time arranging the first three fries, she used the last fry as a string to tie the three fries together with a knot.

"See, we have gathered together because of Comrade Ebisawa. We can form our band because you joined us. Therefore—if we're to come up with a name, it should be decided by this person here."

Senpai placed the bundle of tied fries before Mafuyu. She then pointed to the three fries plus the long one, and said,

"You have to be the one to name the band. With that, you won't be able to leave. As long as you don't leave, the remaining three people will never break apart and be separated."

Senpai continued to look straight into Mafuyu's eyes. Mafuyu bit her lip and lowered her head to shift her gaze away.

"..... But I—"

"You can come up with whatever name you wish. Just use words you like."

"I'll be very troubled if you say that."

"Why?"

"Because..... I only joined because I followed Naomi."

Chiaki looked at me solemnly, but I could only fix my sight on Mafuyu's pale white lips. What's going on here? Why is Mafuyu so afraid?

"Therefore, I cannot be the one to decide something as important as this."

"It's precisely because it's something very important that I want Comrade Ebisawa to decide."

Senpai brought her face right next to Mafuyu's, and said gently,

"I'm not asking you to decide on a name right now. However, I have to rent the place for our live performance, and also work on the posters and the tickets. So, if possible, give me your answer after tomorrow, or at the latest, before the start of the training camp."

"I haven't decided if I want to attend the training camp."

"You don't want to go? Why?"

Mafuyu interrupted Senpai's words by shaking her maroon-colored hair with force. Chiaki and I exchanged looks for a moment—her expression was one of confusion.

We obtained Ebichiri's approval two days ago, but Mafuyu still hadn't expressed any intention of joining the training camp. Senpai and I had already done all sorts of things to convince Ebichiri, but somehow, it was really difficult for us to broach the topic with Mafuyu; so, we never asked her about her interest in joining the training camp.

so this was the first time we heard Mafuyu tell us she was still undecided on going. I felt slightly depressed. To think we had already achieved that sort of understanding when it came to music, and yet, Mafuyu still didn't blend in with us at all? Even for me, I was deeply touched by Mafuyu's music when we played <Kashmir>.....

Just as Senpai was about to speak, Mafuyu loudly pushed her chair away and stood up.

"..... Mafuyu? Wha—"

Ignoring my calls, Mafuyu heaved her guitar case onto her shoulder, and made her way past the tables, disappearing down the stairs in an instant.

That left me—who was halfway standing up—with no choice but to sit back down in my chair.

What the heck, why did things suddenly turn out like this? Did someone say something to make her unhappy?

"..... Well well. This girl is really sensitive."

Senpai murmured. She removed her hair clip to let her long, silky black hair loose, and heaved a sigh.

"I had no intention of reprimanding her, but it seems like she noticed anyway."

Wha—What's this? Did Senpai say something wrong just now? I had no clue what was going on.

"Nao, what are you doing here at a time like this?"

Chiaki's fist was about to fly straight into my face.

"Go chase after her! What are you sitting here in a daze for?"

"Eh? Eh? Me?"

"Just go and chase after her already, idiot! Geez, you're dense!"

Chiaki kicked me hard in my thigh. I immediately got up and quickly made my way towards the stairs.



I caught up to Mafuyu at the entrance of the train station. Amidst the crowd walking downstairs to the platform, I saw a head with maroon-colored hair, and what looked like a guitar case. I quickly pulled out my season ticket and squeezed through the gates.

"Mafuyu!"

She was at the bottom of the flight of stairs, making her way past the benches. Mafuyu turned her head around. There seemed to be tears in the corners of her eyes.

"..... Don't follow me."

"Why are you angry?"

"I am not angry."

The people around us were all looking at me, which made me

pretty uncomfortable. My schoolmates were among them as well.

"Urm..... then why did you act like that?"

My voice was drowned out by the announcement alerting us of the incoming train. I continued chasing Mafuyu and boarded the carriage without hesitation.

"..... You should be taking the train in the other direction, right?"

"Eh? Well, you're not wrong....."

Come to think of it, my bag and bass were still at McDonalds. What should I do? Do I have to make a trip back? Will the two of them wait for my return?

The train left the platform. Mafuyu sat in an empty seat at the edge, and placed her guitar on her knees, to not let anyone see her face. I stood right by her side and leaned next to the door.

"Why did you follow me?"

"No idea. I suddenly had the urge to take a train to a place I haven't been before, and take a stroll around there."

"Idiot."

And with that, Mafuyu said nothing more. In order to ease the tense atmosphere, I began to tell lots of lame jokes—to be honest, I think it'd be better if I fixed that bad habit of mine as soon as possible.

As the shaking of the train began to make its way up my upper body, I began recalling the conversation between Ebichiri and me. We can only wait till Mafuyu feels like talking. The one who said that was—Ah, that's right..... it wasn't me, it was Tetsurou.

That wasn't what I had in mind though. At that point, I could wait no longer. I really felt like pushing away the guitar Mafuyu was hugging so tightly, and shoving my face in front of hers to ask her what exactly was she thinking.

And there was a time that I did say this to her: if anything's troubling you, just voice it all out.

So in the end, she didn't take my words to heart?

As the train was making one of its many stops at some station,

Mafuyu suddenly stood up. I was almost left behind on the train as she dashed out of the carriage right after the bell—which signaled that the train was about to depart—rang.

It was a small remote station; hardly any passengers disembarked the train. There was almost no shelter at the platform, and the strong rays of the sun, coming from the west, were shining hard on the asphalt.

I could see messy patches of small farmlands on the other side of the fence, a road paved by gravel, and sparsely scattered houses.

Eh? Back when I asked Mafuyu about the place she lived—

"Mafuyu, is your house nearby?"

Mafuyu carried her guitar on her shoulder, with her back facing me. She then turned her head around and said,

"..... I just suddenly felt like dropping off at an unknown station."

After murmuring that, she began to make her way towards the wicket. Come to think of it, she's actually a repeat offender when it comes to running away from home, yeah? Is this how she usually carries out her disappearing act? I could already begin to understand why Ebichiri was overprotective of his daughter.

Since I had to get a replacement ticket, I almost lost sight of Mafuyu, who had quickly run out of the wicket. I finally caught up to her at the gravel road, which was situated between two corn fields. However, I couldn't bring myself to yell out her name, so I did what I was used to doing—walking quietly behind her at a distance of about five meters.

We walked on for quite some time before Mafuyu finally stopped in her tracks. She stood in the middle of a bridge that stretched across a nearly dried stream. She stopped because of a **lonely, rusty-sounding electronic tune** that came from faraway. It was a broadcast—played in various public places at five—to remind children it was time for them to head home. The melody was played through the speakers at a few specific places in town. Seemed like the tune was the same for all the cities in Japan. It was the second movement of Dvořák's **<New World Symphony>**.

The same melody was also played by another speaker even

further away. It gently blended in with the initial melody, which had already started to ring some time ago, forming a blurry canon.

Mafuyu grabbed onto the railing at the side of the bridge, and allowed her sight to wander all around in the air, to explore the melody around us.

She mumbled as I caught up to her,

"..... Why must Japan broadcast such a lonely tune every day in the evening? I had traveled all over Japan because of my concerts, but everywhere I went, I always heard the same tune."

I tilted my head. That's strange.

"This song is actually played during funerals in America and other countries," she said as she stared at the stream.

Is that so? It's probably a cultural difference, I guess?

"Well, this tune was later rewritten into <The Road Home (家路)> and <Sunset at the Distant Mountain (遠き山に日は落ちて)>, because it gives people the feeling that it's evening and that it's time to return home..... for us Japanese anyway."

"Really?" With that, Mafuyu closed her eyes and tilted her ears to listen to the rumbling tune as it was sucked into the air.

There were probably not that many people who knew that tune was written by Dvořák. And even fewer probably knew this piece was actually a substitute for a letter to be mailed back to his motherland Czech from the new world America, and that it was filled with deep longings for his homeland.

"..... Why?"

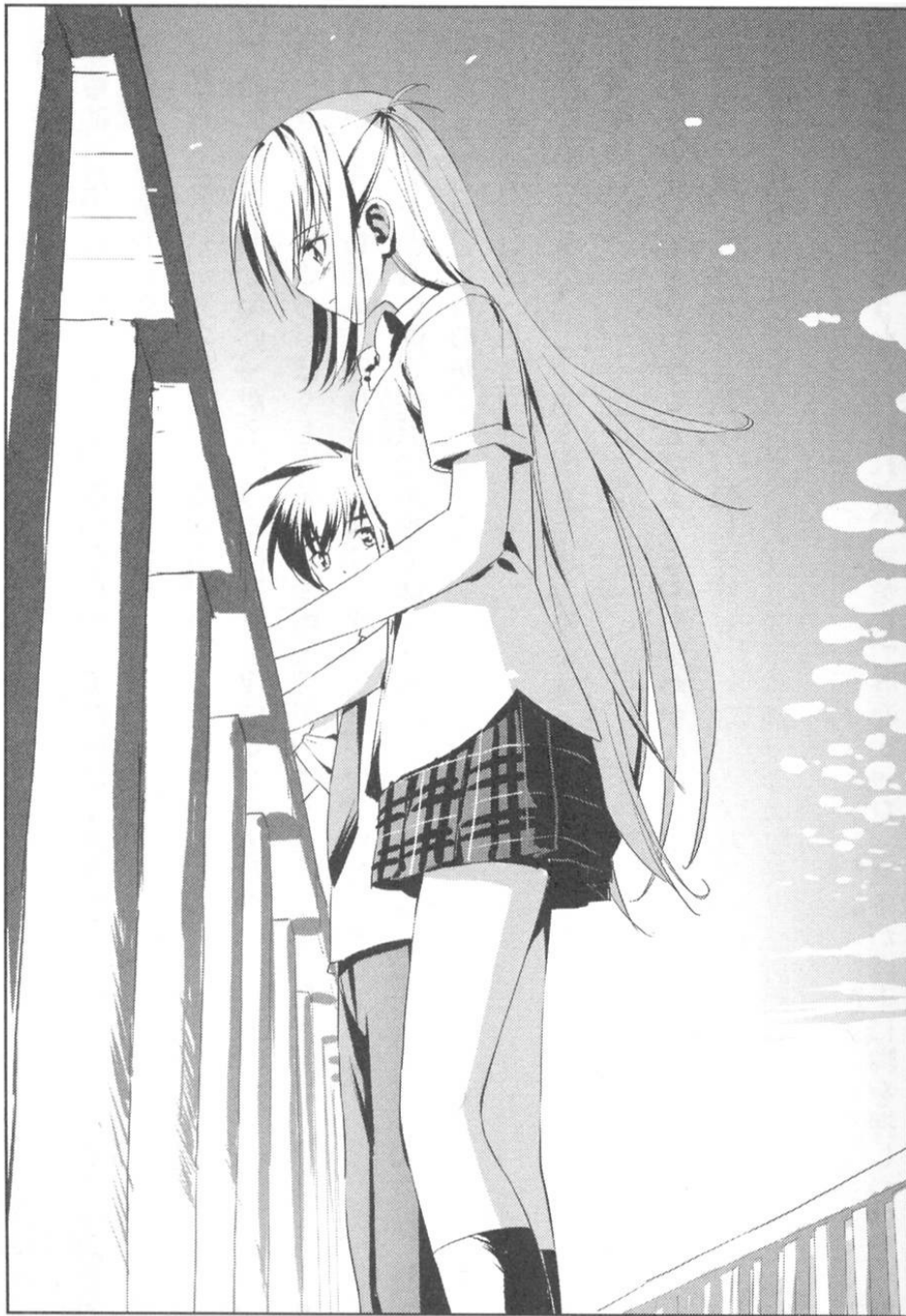
As the sounds around us changed back to the cries of cicadas and the rumbling of a faraway train, Mafuyu asked me softly.

"Why..... did you invite me to join the band?"

"..... Eh?"

"Forget it. It's nothing."

Mafuyu removed the guitar from her shoulders and leaned it against the railing.



"I only joined that club because I lost my bet with you. It's all your fault."

"It's all my fault.....?"

"Senpai probably thinks that as well..... In any case, this is something that everyone knows."

Kagurazaka-senpai..... thinks of it as what? So?

"Therefore, I have absolutely no reason to be in that room."

"That's not—" Is that really not true.....? I swallowed my words halfway.

If we looked only at the results, then it may seem like she was forced to join the club by Senpai and me. Though we were all trying hard not to think about it, Senpai had actually sort of noticed it, and so—

"It's precisely because it's something very important that I want Comrade Ebisawa to decide."

So that's why she said something like that?

"Is the band..... not fun?"

I tried asking her gently.

"I don't know."

What do you mean you don't know!? I should be the one saying that!

"But I feel really happy when the four of us are playing together."

"Isn't it great if you're happy?"

"It's not."

Why? I originally wanted to know the reason, but I couldn't bring myself to ask. Mafuyu stepped on the railing and stuck out her head to look at the stream. For a moment, I thought she might actually jump down.

"You..... don't want to participate in the training camp?"

I was that close to telling her the various things Senpai and I did to convince Ebichiri. However, there wasn't really much purpose in telling her those things just to try to make her thankful of us.

Mafuyu rested her elbows on the railing and shook her head.

"Even if I follow you guys to this so-called training camp—"

"You aren't just following us there!" I interrupted Mafuyu. "We're

gonna practice as a band, so it'd be meaningless if even one of us was missing."

"Is it really okay for me to stay in the band? I don't really know anymore."

"It's not a problem of whether it's okay or not, right?" I really had no idea what Mafuyu was trying to say. "I asked you to join because I wanted to start a band together with you."

"I-It's you!"

Mafuyu raised her head to look at me. Her face was a little red, and it seemed like it wasn't just because of the setting sun.

"It's all because you say things like that!"

With tears in the corners of her eyes and her body trembling slightly, she gave me a push. I retreated a step back. What? Why is Mafuyu angry?

Mafuyu carried her guitar on her back and walked past me, towards the direction we came from. I hurriedly chased after her, but I couldn't walk along her side-by-side, or call out to her from behind.

And because of that, for a short while, I didn't realize Mafuyu was trying to make her way back to the station. It took me a long time before I remembered her sense of direction was extremely poor.

Mafuyu stood in the middle of the lush green fields and turned her head around to look at me with a helpless expression—by then, the sun had nearly disappeared below the horizon.

"It can't be that you....."

"I-I am not lost! It must be in this direction!"

Seeing as how Mafuyu was walking in the complete opposite direction, I pulled her back while trying to endure the urge to sigh. I then began to walk towards the gravel path. If there's someone next to you when you've encountered any sort of problem, you should just tell that person honestly. That might be something that seems simple, but it's hard to carry out in reality. However, it is one of the most fundamental things in life.

The sky was dark by the time we made our way to the station. There were many more passengers disembarking the train as well.

The two of us barely talked, and considering the situation we were in back then, it was impossible for me to follow Mafuyu all the way back to her home. I could only send her off via my sight while standing on the platform. I then took out my cellphone.

"What happened to Mafu-Mafu?"

"Ah—Mmm, she just went back home." I had no idea why, but my heart felt relieved when Chiaki's voice sounded the same as usual—and thus, my very silly reply.

"No, that's not what I meant..... What exactly did you chase after her for then?"

"Sorry, I don't really know either. Ah, right, where are you right now? My stuff is still at McDonalds."

"I already grabbed it for you."

"Ah, sorry for troubling you."

"I'll come bring it to you. Till later."

Just then, the train heading in my direction entered the platform. Chiaki hung up without even waiting for my reply.



Chiaki's house was just a five-minute walk from my house.

Five minutes referred to the length of time it would take to walk along the normal path from her house to mine; however, if we considered the more direct path between our houses, it would probably take no more than two minutes. The so-called "direct path" referred to a route consisting of passing through the restricted area beneath high-voltage wires, squeezing through a tight alley that probably only a cat could get through, and entering the courtyard of my house, before finally scaling the beech next to the walls of my house, and thus, ending up right outside my window. It was a path only Chiaki would take.

After much difficulty, I finally managed to return home at eight in the evening. And after confirming that Tetsurou was out of the house, I immediately ran up to my room on the second floor. I took out the Emerson, Lake & Palmer's <Trilogy> album and placed it in the CD

player, and proceeded to relax on my bed after pressing the play button. However, before the song even hit the fugue, I heard the sound of my window being knocked on.

"I'm coming in—?"

I had opened the windows earlier to ventilate the room, which allowed Chiaki to jump straight into my room before I could even answer her. She had already changed into a T-shirt and denim shorts. After placing my bag and guitar case next to the window, she unreservedly sat herself down on my bed. It was as if she were in her own home.

"Why did you choose to come through the window with all that stuff on you?" It should be tiring climbing the tree, right?

"You should start by thanking me first, right?"

She elbowed me in the back. That hurts.

"Sorry. Thanks."

"Is Uncle not around today? I would've come through the main door if I had known that earlier."

"Mmm, he should probably be out drinking or something."

"Oh? Then let's have a drink as well! You should have some sake in your fridge, right? Go get some snacks to go along with the wine."

"I'm not gonna drink! What on earth are you thinking?"

I changed my position on the bed and fixed my eyes on the ceiling. Just then, Chiaki slowly walked over. She stuck her head out above me and stared into my face.

"Nao should slowly start learning how to drink too! Mafu-Mafu doesn't look like she can drink at all. It'd be too lonely if Senpai and I were the only ones drinking during the celebration parties."

"It's because I'm still underage..... Wait, this means Senpai drinks too?" I sat up unintentionally.

"Mmm. No one was able to match me at drinking after Granddad died—that is, until I met Senpai. It was the first time I had run into someone better than me."

I let out a helpless sigh. Doesn't the law state that we can only

drink after we're twenty?

"I don't know why, but somehow, it feels like it's fate that I was able to meet Senpai."

"Yeah, and she's the reason you began drumming too....."

It was really impressive that she could raise her drumming skills to the level she was at, purely with that impure motive in mind.

"What's wrong with the motive being impure? The most important thing is to be happy. If only Mafu-Mafu could think the same way."

"..... Eh?"

As Chiaki had brought up Mafuyu all of a sudden, I kept staring at her face.

"You two didn't talk about that?"

"Hmm.....?"

It seemed like we did, and yet, it seemed like we didn't. Indeed, Mafuyu was agonizing over her reason for staying in the band, and whether or not it was fine for her to be there.

"That means Mafu-Mafu stayed in the band due to some other impure motive, which is why she's agonizing over things? It should be that. Moreover, she's the type to dwell on even the tiniest details, unlike me."

"What do you mean by an 'impure motive'? It's impure because she lost a bet with me?"

It may be impure—but is Mafuyu really troubled about that? I should be the one who's ill at ease because of that, no? However, all Chiaki did was stare at my face—with her mouth half-opened—for quite a while. After, she placed her forehead on her bent knees and sighed.

"I know that you're dense and stupid, but I never expected it to be that bad."

All I could do was forcefully swallow my words back into my stomach. I couldn't retort that at all, because it was exactly as Chiaki had said. I'm really sorry about that! The problem is, how can you expect me to know anything if Mafuyu doesn't say anything at all about it!?

"Well, I guess. I mean, he hasn't even come to realize it over a period of more than ten years, so how could it be possible for him to realize something that's only three months old?"

"Eh? Sorry, what are you saying?"

Chiaki stuck out her tongue at me and brushed me off. Please, I'm really at a loss here! While I was still unsure of what was going on, Chiaki stood up and straightened out the creases on her shorts with her fingers.

"Alright, I'm going to leave the dense idiot alone and head home now. I'll come up with something myself."

"What do you mean by come up with something?"

"You'll feel troubled if Mafu-Mafu continues to distance herself from the band, right? If the situation forces us to, it'll only be the three of us going to the training camp."

I nodded my head stiffly.

"Mmm. I'll be very troubled too. I don't like an uncontested victory, or losing without a fight."

After saying a bunch of things I was completely clueless about, Chiaki made her way through the window and out of my room. Coincidentally, the fugue part played by Keith Emerson just so happened to end exactly at that moment as well; the tune was about to head into part two of [<The Endless Enigma>](#).

Chapter 4 - feketerigó

Every morning, Chiaki never failed to arrive in class just barely on time. It wasn't because she overslept or had poor time management though; rather, it was because she always continued practicing on the drums in our club room even after the preparatory bell rang. She came from a sports club, so that was probably why she loved practicing in the morning.

However, Chiaki was actually late this morning, which was quite rare for her.

I didn't see her earlier when I went to the club room to drop off my bass, and even after the bell for classes had rung and the teacher had stepped into the classroom, she was still nowhere to be found. Mafuyu had refused to look at me since the beginning of the day, and I had hoped that the tense atmosphere between us would ease up once Chiaki got here..... I guess I shouldn't be so dependent on others.

"Morning!"

When Chiaki opened the door (located behind me, diagonally to the right) and entered the classroom in a strangely energetic way, we were already ten minutes into the first period. Our young and timid English teacher even dropped the chalk on the floor in shock. Chiaki leisurely made her way between Mafuyu's desk and mine, then sat down at her seat. Aside from her school bag, she was also carrying a huge plastic bag with a handle on it.

"Teacher, am I considered late? Or was I already marked absent?"

Our English teacher looked at the clock, then coughed twice and said softly, "I'll count you as late this time, but don't enter the classroom so brazenly next time."

"Right. I'm sorry."

She took her textbook out of her bag and, at the same time, turned her head over and stuck out her tongue shyly. "I shouldn't have stayed up late last night."

"What are you carrying?"

"Hmm? Oh, I'll tell you later."

Right after class was over, Chiaki opened up the plastic bag she had brought to class and pulled something out from inside. "Tada!" She proudly showed it to Mafuyu and me.

Mafuyu was stunned; her mouth was wide open. My expression was probably the same as hers.

It was a white T-shirt—and over the chest, was a cute image designed using psychedelic purple and orange colors.

<Ebisawa Mafuyu & LOLLYPOPS>



That was actually what was written on it.

"This is.....?"

After much difficulty, I finally managed to force that line out of my throat.

"What's this? The T-shirt of our band, of course! It's really cute, right? I was thinking, if Mafu-Mafu hasn't decided on a name for our band yet, then we'll just use this name."

Chiaki said that proudly. With a feeling of disbelief, I confirmed the strange name yet again, then shot a glance at Mafuyu—her face was pale white.

"Well, it just so happened that Nao was listening to EL&P when I went to his house yesterday, and an idea suddenly came to me—why don't we also name our band E&LP."

"W-Why is my name in there?"

"Because Mafu-Mafu's our band leader. See, it's just like <Hajime Hana & The Crazy Cats^[1]

Exactly how old are you? Is it because you frequently drink with your uncles and relatives? There were times when Chiaki spoke just like an old geezer..... no, actually, she sounded older than them.

"Leader? M-me? Why?"

"Eh? Didn't you hear it from Senpai?" said Chiaki, as she spread the T-shirt out on the table. "Senpai said that the Folk Music Research Club is a revolutionary army, right?"

"Come to think of it, she did.....?"

My memories began drifting to the distant past as I murmured. Kagurazaka-senpai was a self-proclaimed revolutionist. As for us, whom she had gathered, it seemed we were her comrades in her revolution.

"She said that I'm the fighter, Nao's the secretary, and Mafu-Mafu's the Highest-whatever-Chancellor."

"I have never heard that before." Somehow, Mafuyu was close to tears.

"Hey..... Shouldn't the band leader be Senpai?" I interrupted.

"Senpai's the Chief Secretary. Which means..... even though it seems like the person who holds the most power is the great leader, that's only on paper. In actual fact, the one in control of everything is

the Chief Secretary. That's the so-called 'Troika' system."

"Is that so?" "You're referring to the Soviets?" "I see." "I learned something new today."

The classmates around us were all enthusiastically nodding their heads. Somehow, I was no longer affected by their antics.

"Therefore, I put Mafu-Mafu's name in the name of the band."

"..... I don't want that."

"Why don't you come up with a name yourself then?"

Mafuyu gripped the table tightly and refused to let go.

"Aihara, I want that T-shirt." "Ah, me too. LL size."

"I'll just charge you guys three thousand five hundred yen a piece."

"That's costly!" "It's just you cutting out a template and spraying paint over it, right?"

"It's common practice for a band to earn cash through selling merchandise."

As Chiaki—surrounded by a bunch of guys—displayed her knack for business, Mafuyu's face became paler and paler. I wondered if I should speak to her, but I had no idea what to say.

There was a sudden and loud bang. Mafuyu had suddenly pushed her chair backwards, making everyone around her turn their head around in shock. She dashed out of the classroom, as though she was trying to run away from the stares of our classmates. I was about to give chase, but Chiaki was a step faster than me.

"Wait!"

Chiaki shouted outside the classroom. I followed suit and ran out as well. Chiaki gripped Mafuyu's hand as Mafuyu tried her hardest to shake loose. Shit, this scene's a mess. Just as I was about to intervene—

"Mafuyu! Look at me and listen!"

Chiaki spoke.

Mafuyu suddenly stopped moving. She leaned herself stiffly against the walls of the corridor, and turned her body slightly towards Chiaki; she held her head low the entire time.

I just looked on like a moron—there was nothing I could do to get close, and nothing I could say.

"Listen. Half the reason I'm staying in the Folk Music Research Club is because of Senpai."

Chiaki held onto Mafuyu's hands as she continued.

"As for the other half, it's the same reason as you, Mafuyu. You should understand, right?"

Mafuyu lifted her head up in surprise. I could only see Chiaki's back, but somehow, it felt like she was giving off a gentle smile.

"There's nothing wrong with that!"

"I, I....."

Mafuyu's face went red. She didn't finish what she was about to say, as the bell signaling the start of the second period had rung.



Mafuyu left the classroom in a hurry after school, and was nowhere in sight during band practice. I then realized she didn't actually bring her guitar today.

"I guess I'll go look around for her. Her shoes are still in the shoe cabinet."

As I was about to walk out of the practice room, Senpai grabbed my shoulders from behind.

"There's no point in doing that. Comrade Aihara already did what needed to be done. All that's left are problems Comrade Ebisawa will have to deal with herself."

I glanced at Chiaki. She was sitting in the middle of the drum set, staring at the handmade T-shirt spread out over her knees.

The things she needed to do—

The things Chiaki said this morning—

I sat myself on the floor. I had no idea what was going on at all. Her reason for staying in the band? What does that mean?

"Did..... I go overboard this time?" Chiaki mumbled.

"We can leave that for the historians of the future to decide. For now....."

Senpai took a piece of paper, that was folded in half, out of her pocket and opened it.

"Today's the last day..... for registering for of the live performance."

Forget about the name of the band—the part where we were supposed to fill in the names of the band members was blank as well. I suddenly felt a chill in me.

If—Mafuyu quits the band, just like that. What should we do then?

Chiaki lifted the T-shirt and said, "Can't we just fill this name in for now?" Senpai put on one of her rare bitter expressions and said,

"Mmm..... You know, I'm actually glad Comrade Aihara wasn't the last member to join the band."

"Senpai's horrible!"

That was the only time I actually readily agreed with Senpai.

"Isn't that a really suitable name for a cute and loli-loli band like us?"

"You can use that name after I leave....."

"How about having Nao dressed up as a girl too?"

"Over my dead body."

Senpai plugged her guitar into the amplifiers and used the noise generated to interrupt our silly conversation.

"I'll come up with something to push back the deadline to noon tomorrow. Let's all wait for Comrade Ebisawa here tomorrow morning! Then, I'll skip my lessons and submit the application form to the live house we'll be performing at."

Senpai then turned her head to look at me.

"It's just a name we're using for our application. Even if we don't make it in time, it doesn't mean anything. If there's really nothing we can do this time, there's always a next time. Don't put that expression on your face."

"Well, you aren't wrong....." What exactly is the expression on my

face right now?

"More importantly, have you come up with a rough estimate of the fees required for the training camp?"

"Eh? Yeah, I'm done."

Since our only expense was food, I was in charge of the finances for the trip.

"Four thousand and five hundred yen per person."

"Whoa! That's cheap. Do we really have to pay that little for a three-day-and-two-night trip? Are snacks included in that?" Chiaki asked. Bring your own snacks!

"..... That's the price if four people are going, right?"

Senpai suddenly asked. I said nothing, and gave a nod. It'd be cheaper to prepare meals for more people, so the cost would definitely go up if only three of us were going.

"So the problem now lies with us huh?"

Senpai sighed as she tuned her guitar. What exactly will Mafuyu decide regarding the training camp?

Is she really not planning to go? There was no way I could discuss that with her if she didn't come to practice.

There's no point in doing all this if Mafuyu isn't coming!

"Well, it's pointless for us to continue talking about it any further. Let's begin our practice!" Senpai stood up as she said that.

For some reason, I had zero motivation to pick up my bass.

Right here, right now, the minimum three elements required to start a rock band are here—a guitarist, a bassist and a drummer.

If we were to create music in our current form—

We could start up the band, albeit barely, even if Mafuyu wasn't around—

Senpai stared at my face for a while, then said,

"I guess we'll start with some covers. You should know how to play [**<Hotel California>**](#), right?"

I nodded. Senpai began strumming the quiet intro on her guitar.

Earlier on, when we had first started the band, we frequently practiced a number of songs by The Eagles. And even now, when we were waiting for everyone to gather in the practice room, we would sometimes randomly start playing some of those songs. We've practiced the songs so many times that my fingers have already memorized them.

Perhaps Senpai had already seen what was on my mind?

It's said that, when The Eagles were recording this song, there was actually a part in the intro where thirteen guitar sounds were overlapped. It was impossible for Senpai to do that alone. Even though there were only a few overlapping improvisational parts and solos, there was no way Senpai could replicate all that with just her hands alone.

I had almost forgotten to sing the chorus with Senpai. All I did was strum the bass in a daze, as I immersed myself in Senpai's vocals, and experienced for myself the blankness beneath her voice.

She—Mafuyu, wasn't here.



The practice ended really quickly. I made my way to the staff room to return the keys to the practice room and ran into Miss Maki just outside the door.

"Oh, Nao. Come here for a moment."

"Huh? Me?"

Miss Maki's hair was tied up, and as usual, she was dressed in a white pleated blouse and tight miniskirt. Though she dressed really formally, she was actually a really violent teacher, which was difficult to conflate with her role as a music teacher. I really do hope, in the future, she'll stop dragging me around by my ears.

"Miss, that's the girls' toilet over there!"

I tried my hardest to resist after realizing I was being pulled into a really terrible place.

"Ah, that won't do."

Miss Maki pulled me to a turn at the staircase. Just up the stairs

was the fourth floor—it was a corner of the music room that almost no student would pass by this late in the day. Miss Maki forced me against the wall and pressed her heel into my foot. She then began her interrogation.

"Mafuyu came to the preparatory room just now."

"Eh.....?"

I see. So she ran to the preparatory room huh? Miss Maki used to be Ebichiri's student—Ebichiri was Mafuyu's father—back when he was a lecturer in college. It seemed she had been close to Mafuyu since way back.

"I have no idea why, but for some reason, she seems pretty depressed. Did you two quarrel or something?"

"Nope, nothing much happened..... Ah! Ouch! Don't shift your body weight onto your heels!"

"I did mention before, that you should be prepared to have your arms broken if you made Mafuyu cry, right?"

"Since when!" Though she did say she wouldn't let me off easily.

"What happened? Aren't the two of you getting along really well?"

"Do we look like we're on great terms with each other?"

Miss Maki shrugged.

"So you're really unaware of it..... All that girl talks about is you and the Folk Music Research Club."

"Eh? No, that's just....."

Things wouldn't have reached this state if we were on good terms with each other, right?

"She's still in the preparatory room, so go and look for her. Just say I told you to tell her to go home quickly."

"..... Understood."

Just as I was about make my way upstairs, the back of my collar was suddenly pulled back.

"Whoa!"

"I almost forgot. There's something else."

I turned around and saw a smile plastered on Miss Maki's face.

"I heard you people are going on a training camp? Without asking permission from me, the teacher-in-charge?"

"Eh? Ah! Uwaaaa!" Damn Mafuyu, she told her? Good lord..... why did you tell her that!

"And it's at a villa next to the beach? You guys sure know how to enjoy yourselves."

Miss Maki's eyes became abnormally frightening. I tried to move back in fear, but she was stepping on my foot, and holding my tie as well. I surrendered.

"Don't you think it'd be better if an adult came along? I just so happened to have bought a new piece of swimwear last summer, but haven't had a chance to go for a swim since then!"

"Well..... But—"

"Just kidding. It just so happens I have work that day, so I can't make it. You must feel really relieved now, right? Did you heave a sigh from the bottom of your heart, you brat?"

"Ugh——"

The pain was hell if the choke was applied in the wrong place.

"And so? What about Mafuyu? She said she wasn't going, and Maestro Ebichiri disallowed her from going as well?"

"Ah, no. We've already obtained permission from her father."

So..... she already made it clear she wasn't going? Despite Miss Maki's grip on me, it felt like I was slowly sinking towards the bottom of the sea.

"Are you going there and leaving Mafuyu by herself?"

"No way..... I want to try talking to her, and ask her to come along. Everyone will be troubled if she doesn't come." Speaking of which, it's about time you let go of me, right?

"Everyone will be troubled if Mafuyu doesn't go? Why?"

"Why..... huh?" Why is she asking me that? "Because she's our guitarist."

"That's not what I meant!"

For some reason, a sinister smile appeared on Miss Maki's face. She moved her face closer to mine, making me want to turn away, but I couldn't do so, as her tight clamp had immobilized my head.

"Well, just tell Mafuyu honestly..... about why you'd be troubled if she didn't go."

Why—I'd feel troubled?

Miss Maki's words caused me to fall into silence.

"Speaking of which, you people aren't going there just to swim, right? Putting aside the guitars, what are you guys planning to do about the drums, amplifiers and such?"

"..... Eh?" Miss Maki's grip loosened for a brief moment, and I took the opportunity to slip away from her.

"The equipment in the club room belongs to the school, right? You people won't be able to borrow any of it if it's an unofficial club gathering."

It was just as she said. What's Senpai planning to do about that? Then again, I don't think she was one to not think about things like this.

"In any case, I've done my part to remind you guys beforehand! The school would never agree to something like having students stay overnight outside by themselves, so open your eyes and make sure you people aren't discovered by the other teachers."

And with that, Miss Maki walked downstairs and left. So she's actually someone who doesn't really dwell on the details.



Music used to be a core subject at our school, so the whole fourth floor housed equipment related to music. At the end of the stairs, straight to the left, was a door covered with red felt; it looked just like a door you'd see at a concert hall. That was the music hall, which was rarely used. Located along the side of the corridor, extending outwards to the right, were the storerooms, which were used to store all sorts of musical instruments. And at the end of the corridor, was a metallic door, which led to the music room we used for our typical music lessons.

I heard a series of melodies coming from an electric guitar not plugged into an amplifier; the sounds emanated from a room to the right of the music room—the music preparatory room. The guitar's timbre sounded beautifully delicate and gentle.

What song is that..... It should be the harpsichord part of <Brandenburg Concerto No. 5>? She actually managed to clearly replicate the rich sounds of the arpeggio with just a single guitar. As I carefully listened to Mafuyu play the guitar, I recalled how weak <Hotel California> had sounded earlier, when just the three of us were playing.

When the song was over, I could hear the sounds of Mafuyu tuning her guitar. Despite that, I remained rooted outside the door, not moving an inch. What should I do? Mafuyu would probably be angry if I just opened the door and walked in like that.

"..... Mafuyu?"

In the end, I tried calling her name out softly. The sounds of her tuning suddenly stopped. The words I wanted to say, that were frozen in my mouth, disappeared completely as well.

Because—Mafuyu hadn't said anything to me yet.

And I—had no idea what to say as well.

"Well..... Urm, Senpai said the registration for the live performance..... closes tomorrow."

I pressed my palms against the wall and said that, word by word.

"Since we have to fill in the names of the band members, as well as the name of the band itself..... if we don't decide soon, we may actually have to use the name Chiaki came up with."

I noticed a slight change in Mafuyu's breathing when I mentioned Chiaki's name.

"So, well....."

I tried desperately to find a suitable word..... Right, I'll just start from that. I wanted to ask her about it anyway.

"About the training camp. Do you have any reason not to go?"

It felt like a long time had passed before I heard her answer.

"Actually..... there's no special reason."

Mafuyu's murmurs came from behind the thin door. I felt slightly relieved upon being able to speak with Mafuyu, but then came her next line.

"However, there is no real reason for me to go either."

"Wha.....!" That's just too much! What's with that!? "Then what did you join the band for?"

"I don't know," came Mafuyu's reply. "I really don't know."

She sounded just like a lost child. I squatted in the corridor and thought hard for a while.

"If you attend the training camp, then perhaps you'll know."

I tried replying to her with that. Even I myself felt it was quite a silly answer—it sounded like something a kid in elementary school would say. However, there was no taking it back once I said it out loud.

"It's not just practice. Everyone will swim, eat, and play with fireworks together."

It seems fun, so why don't you try it? Is that not a good enough reason?

I remembered Miss Maki's words: just tell her honestly about what's troubling you.

Even though it was something that had to do with me, the me back then couldn't comprehend it. And so, in order to solve the most immediate problem before me, I told Mafuyu,

"Since you joined our club, we wish to participate in the training camp together with you."

Not just to practice, but also to play together. To talk about all sorts of things together.

"And since there won't be any teachers around, we can play as much as we like! Moreover, there won't be anyone to complain about us, regardless of how loud we get, since we'll be staying in a villa. Also, even though it might sound like I'm bragging, I'll be preparing some really delicious food as well! Urm, and it won't cost much—just four thousand and five hundred yen per person for a three-day-and-two-night trip—"

I realized I was speaking faster and faster, and talking about all sorts of stupid things.

"And so, well....."

I slowly let out the air jammed in my throat. There's nothing much left for me to say, right?

That was all the me back then could do.

"..... I'll be waiting for you in the practice room tomorrow."

After that, I waited breathlessly for a moment, but there was no reply from inside.

Sigh. I guess the only thing I can do is wait.

I silently left the door. While making my way towards the stairs, I actually stopped twice to turn around and look back. It somehow felt like I could faintly hear the sound of Mafuyu playing her guitar. Dvořák's music..... but that may just have been the evening bell of the faraway towns.



Unfortunately, I met Chiaki at the train station the next morning, and was thus left with no choice but to take the same train as her to school. It was 6:40 A.M.—normally, I would've still been in bed at that hour.

"You didn't sleep well last night?"

As we traveled in the wobbling train, Chiaki, who was sitting next to me, suddenly came up close to me and stared at me.

"Hmm? Nah! I slept really soundly."

With my head lowered, I leaned against the bass and wove a lie.

"Have you been coming up with names for the band?"

"Mmm..... I guess."

"So you don't actually trust Mafuyu? I feel sad for her."

Aren't you the same as me? You even made a T-shirt. I originally wanted to retort with that, but upon changing my perspective a little, I guess that was probably the best thing Chiaki could come up with..... right?

"I've come up with over ten more names since then."

"Aren't you the same as me!" Damn, what a waste of energy, trying to view her in a better light by considering things from a different perspective. Chiaki then took out a notebook and confidently showed me a long list of backup names for the band. I couldn't help but sigh when I saw that.

It was about seven when we reached school. We went to the staff room, but couldn't find the keys to the practice room in the key box.

"Strange? Nao, you returned the keys yesterday right?"

"Mmm....."

Chiaki and I exchanged looks for a brief moment. That meant someone had come to school earlier than us, and had already made her way to the practice room.

There were only two possibilities—Chiaki immediately turned around and ran, almost bumping into a teacher while making her way outside the door. She ignored the yells of the teacher and scooted away from his side. She then dashed through the corridors, towards the courtyard.

Chiaki roughly pulled open the door to the practice room—her shoulders slumped immediately. Following closely behind, I glanced inside the room, and exchanged looks with the person inside.

The person in the practice room was not Mafuyu, but Kagurazaka-senpai—no wait, she's Kagurazaka-senpai alright, but w-why is her blouse unbuttoned halfway? Her lingerie was showing, and she was in the process of removing her skirt—

"Whoa—!"

Chiaki let out a shout, then shut the door after elbowing me, who was behind her. Damn, that hurts!

After a while, Senpai opened the door and stuck her head out from inside.

"Sorry, I never thought you guys would be here that early. You two can come in now."

Chiaki stepped into the room really quickly. As for me, I couldn't help but feel a little intimidated—I mean, Senpai was changing in the

room not too long ago, yeah?

Senpai had changed out of her uniform, into a patched denim miniskirt and a T-shirt with the photo of the Cuban revolutionist Che Guevara—that outfit had anarchism written all over it.

"Why are you changing here?"

"Didn't I tell you yesterday? Today's the final day. I have to hand in the application form to the live house we'll be performing at."

Oh, right! She did indeed say that before. So that means, the reason Senpai wore her uniform to school, was just so she could enter the staff room to get the keys? What exactly is this person going to school for?

"Speaking of which, I never thought the band members would be here this early. We really are united!"

And with that, Senpai patted Chiaki's head.

"This can't be considered all the members, right?"

Chiaki lifted her head and asked softly.

"Mmm, you're right."

Senpai nodded her head, then proceeded to take out the application form from yesterday from her pocket. She then pulled a desk out from the corner of the room, and placed the opened form on it. In the box asking for the members' names, four names were already filled in.

Aihara Chiaki (Dr). Ebisawa Mafuyu (G). Kagurazaka Kyouko (G, Vo). Hikawa Naomi (B, Vo).

Only the name of the band was left blank.

I didn't want to think too much about it, so I changed my focus to some other place on the form..... Eh?

"Oh, what about the rental fees for the place?"

It was impossible for us to perform live for free, but I had completely forgotten about cash-related matters. Though two other bands would be performing with us, the individual amount each of us would have to pay should still be pretty costly. However, all Senpai did was show a faint smile.

"You don't have to worry about that. We are the guest performers, so we don't have to spend a single cent."

"Eh?"

What's this? How is it possible for such good things to happen..... ah, this person here must've done something again? I guess it'd be better if I didn't pursue it any further. It feels really scary.

"Should Comrade Ebisawa not make it in time—right, why don't we just use the name <Folk Music Research Club>?"

Senpai tapped the tip of the pen in the box for the band's name.

Chiaki opposed immediately with, "Eww— that's not cute at all."

"Really? I quite like the name though."

"Then why don't we just use <みんおん>? It's much easier to remember with just four characters."^[2]

"That sounds like the name of a pub in some suburb. I can't accept that."

"Then how about adding an exclamation mark at the end. <みんおん!>"

Chiaki took out her notebook again and began reading out the names she came up with, one by one; as for Senpai, she was rejecting them one after another in a loving manner. I sat myself on the stool and leaned my bass against the wall, listening to their conversation halfheartedly.

Back then—Mafuyu had waited for me in here as well. The day I suggested we have our guitar showdown. Despite her not giving me any sort of reply, she still waited for me. Therefore, this time, all I could do was wait for her like this.

Thinking about it, it somehow felt like Mafuyu and I had always failed in trying to get our points across clearly. There were times when we could communicate, but there were times when we couldn't—and with the gradual accumulation of miscommunication, it felt like there might come a day when all that would turn into an unsalvageable misunderstanding or something?

If that's really the case, then shouldn't I try asking her properly?

That's if Mafuyu is—



Senpai and Chiaki had actually left me alone when they noticed I was silent and engrossed in my own thoughts. How long have those two gone on with their conversation already? The chimes of the bell pulled my consciousness back to reality. I was shocked. I quickly directed my sight to the clock in the room. The sound I heard was the preparatory bell right before lessons—class was starting in five minutes.

Both Chiaki and Senpai, who were chatting at the table, turned their sights to the clock as well. A bone-chilling silence followed after the chimes were over—it didn't feel like we were in the middle of the blistering summer in July at all.

"Young man."

Senpai gestured towards me. I stood up, and Senpai placed the pen in my hands.

"We have no other choice. You are the third person to join the band, so you decide."

"Eh....."

I stared straight into Senpai's face.

Mafuyu didn't come, so I'm the one—

"But....."

"It's just a name, so don't think too deeply about it. Nothing will change because of it."

Is that really so? I thought to myself as I stared at the application form.

It somehow felt like Mafuyu would no longer come here if she didn't appear now? Should I sever the relationship between us right here.....

I adjusted my grip on the pen—I spent the whole night yesterday thinking about it, before finally deciding on something. Should the situation come to the point where I would have to be the one to come up with the name of the band, I would name us <Blackbird>.

However, this name would lose its meaning if Mafuyu would no

longer come here. It would become a name that forced me to recognize the fact that we could no longer fly with our wings broken.

The tip of the pen came into contact with the paper. Just as I was about to write the first character "B"—

Senpai lifted her head suddenly. She looked past my shoulders, towards the door of the practice room—and smiled.

I held my breath and turned my head around.

The heavy door had opened, revealing a slit that allowed the summer air to gush into the room. Chiaki ran to the door and quickly opened it. Mafuyu, who was outside the door, was about to take a step back, but Chiaki immediately grabbed her by the wrists, causing her to flinch.

Next to me, Senpai said, "Morning, Comrade Ebisawa."

As for me—I couldn't say a single word. The countless words were all stuck in my chest.

In the end, I passed the pen to Mafuyu, who was pulled into the room by Chiaki. That was the only thing I could do.

Mafuyu stared at the pen for quite a while, before accepting it with her left hand. She stood at the door for a long time, despite me having left the table already.

Next, Mafuyu walked slowly towards the table. She wrote the letters in the blank space of the application form, without any hints of hesitation.

feketerigó

"How do you pronounce that?" Chiaki asked softly.

"Fe-ke-te-li-ko," Mafuyu mumbled. That's quite an intriguing pronunciation. What language is that?

"Does your mother speak with a Dutch or German accent?"

Mafuyu and I lifted our heads at the same time when we heard that sudden line from Senpai.

"..... How did you know? Mama mentioned before she was born in Holland."

"Because you don't usually pronounce the 'g' as 'k' in Hungarian.

Nevertheless, it sounds much nicer this way."

Senpai took a good look at the name Mafuyu had written. The smile on her face looked as gentle as the white clouds floating in the sky in the early morning.

"You like this song?"

Mafuyu took a while before nodding in response to Senpai's question. Somehow, it felt like she had stolen a glance at me when she did that, and that caused my face to burn.

Which song is that? The pronunciation of <feketerigó> somehow made me feel like I would gently fly up into the sky in an instant.

"It's a really good name."

With that, Senpai folded the application form and stuffed it in her pocket. She then quickly got close to Mafuyu and pecked her lightly on her cheeks. Mafuyu's face went red in surprise, and she took a step backwards.

"Ah, right. Comrade Ebisawa, just pass the four thousand and five hundred yen in your pocket to the young man! I've designated him to be in charge of all finance-related matters."

Senpai said that just as she was about to step out of the classroom, and Mafuyu's face went red yet again.

When the door closed, Mafuyu took a brown envelope out of her chest pocket and stuffed it in my face.

"Whoa!"

I managed to grab the envelope before it fell to the floor. There were a few thousand-yen notes and some five-hundred yen coins inside.

"Eh? This....." You don't have to give it to me now! Then again, it means that, right? It's *that*, right? I wasn't quite confident, so I snuck a glance at Chiaki, who was standing beside me. Wow, her face was lit up with happiness.

"Put it away quickly."

Mafuyu turned her head away as she said that. I placed the envelope in the pocket of the guitar case. It was only then that I realized my heart was thumping wildly. I had no idea why, but I

couldn't calm myself down. I can finally attend training camp together with Mafuyu! Everyone can go there together!

"Mafuyu, teach me how to spell out the name of our band again. I want to tan it on my skin when we're at the beach."

Chiaki's ecstatic voice came from behind me.

"I am bad with the sun, and I do not know how to swim."

"Ah, we'll have to bring a parasol then. Do you want to buy our swimwear together?"

"I said I do not know how to swim—"

"Don't worry. I'll bring a giant float along."

Chiaki pushed Mafuyu's back as they walked out of the room.

"Naomi."

Mafuyu was just outside the door when she suddenly turned her head around and called out my name. My gaze shot passed Chiaki's shoulders and went straight into Mafuyu's eyes.

"..... Will I really know?"

When she asked me that question, Mafuyu's eyes still looked as though they were skies filled with dark clouds. I suddenly felt my chest tighten a fair bit.

"Know what?" Chiaki moved her face close to Mafuyu's to look at her. Mafuyu shook her head, so Chiaki turned her sight to me instead.

If you attend the training camp, then perhaps you'll know—that was the irresponsible sentence that came out of my mouth. The reason Mafuyu joined this band, as well as the things that caused Mafuyu to feel lost—

The looks from the two of them were boring into me. I swallowed hard and nodded.

"You should be able to find the answer..... probably."

If felt like Mafuyu's slightly uneasy gaze was fixed on the tip of my nose. I couldn't help but lower my head and stare at my fingers. And then, I took a step forward—

"I promise you....." As I said that, I stretched my hand out towards

Mafuyu, "That if you aren't able to find an answer, I'll listen to everything you have to say."

It was a promise I had made some time ago.

Mafuyu's face flushed red. After brushing my outstretched fist away with her hand, she turned around and ran towards the school building.

Chiaki looked at me with no idea of what was going on, then followed suit behind Mafuyu.

I turned my head back to look at the empty practice room.

The reason for Mafuyu to be here—

Somehow, I felt there was no one who could tell her the answer to that. She had to find it on her own. You see, I myself had no idea why I was hanging around here. However, I had no intention of harboring lingering doubts forever while hanging around with the rest of the members of the band.

I turned my sight to the empty desk. It somehow felt like the name Mafuyu wrote had been carved into the surface of the desk when Senpai traced out the name with her fingers.

feketerigó. A name that tied us all together.

Can we find it during our training camp? The certain thing that's definitely there, that binds Mafuyu and me together.

The bell for classes finally rang. Shit, I'm gonna be late. I locked the practice room and dashed towards my class.

Somewhere, among the cluster of trees in the courtyard, the cicadas began to sing.

Notes

1. [Wiki link](#).
2. Read as "Min-on". Something like K-On, except it's a short for their club. It's written in Hiragana, but I guess the Kanji should be 民音

Chapter 5 - Into the Beach

I was packing my luggage in front of the fan, my body drenched in sweat, when I received a phone call.

"Nao, which is better—blue or purple?"

Chiaki threw that random question at me all of a sudden. Through the phone, I could hear music from <Le Grand Orchestre de Paul Mauriat> playing in the background. Blue or purple? What's going on? Also, where are they calling from?

"You see, Mafuyu and I are currently buying our swimsuits. I've already decided on pink."

"Ah. You guys are at the mall?"

"Yup yup. And since it's already the summer holidays, there's a lot of people here. It's so packed."

So Mafuyu really went out with Chiaki to buy swimsuits together? I was quite surprised.

"And Mafuyu just can't decide. Nao, you pick one."

"Why me?"

"Because Mafuyu says she doesn't know how to swim! So the swimsuit she's buying will be purely for looks, so Nao has to be the one to choose!"

"I don't know what the heck's going on in your brain. Pick a color yourself!"

"Ah— Forget it. Right, I'll take a photo of her trying on the swimsuit with my phone and mail it to you."

"— Y-You can't!" came the voice of Mafuyu from behind. It sounded like she was close to tears.

And with that, the call was disconnected. What the heck was that?

I repeatedly flipped the phone in my hands—I was actually waiting for that mail for quite some time, so much that I had nearly forgotten to resume packing. A picture of Mafuyu in a swimsuit huh..... will

she really mail it? No no no. What the heck am I thinking? Mafuyu would definitely reject that.

But thanks to Chiaki, I remembered something—I went over to my drawers and dug out my swimming trunks, then slipped it into a corner of my backpack. Will we even have time to swim when we're there?

The beach? Everyone will be in their swimwear, right? Suddenly, I began to roll about on my bed for no reason. It was only then that I finally began to understand what my classmates were feeling when they created such a stir back then. It'd be just the four of us there—just the four of us, at the beach, and we'd be staying in a villa. How should I put it? It just feels incredibly awesome.

I quickly returned to normal and sat up on my bed. Our live performance is less than two weeks away. Practice should be our topmost priority.

In any case, tomorrow's the day.



"Nao, how do I heat up the water for bathing?"

"Didn't I just teach you not too long ago?"

"Nao, I don't know where my underwear is."

"How the heck would I know where you put it!?"

On the night of the same day, I tried making Tetsurou do some housework by himself. It would just be for three days and two nights, but it would turn out to be a real headache for me if he couldn't take care of himself with no one else home.

"Hey, it's still not too late. Are you really not bringing me along? I'd be of great help. My specialty is helping girls rub suntan lotion on their backs."

"You can start by rubbing the medicinal lotion on your stinking athlete's foot!"

"Nao, you're way too naive. That's not athlete's foot. It's ringworm."

"Shut up! And don't get close to me."

Tetsurou curled himself up while squatting down in a corner of the room and mumbled things like "I don't remember bringing up a child like that....." I left him alone and returned to my room on the second floor. I checked the changed strings on my bass one last time. I have to be up early tomorrow, so I should go take a quick shower and head to sleep.



We were supposed to gather at Nagashima's Musical Instrument Store—the store Kagurazaka-senpai worked at—the next day. It was a considerable distance away from the shopping street the closest train station was at. The music store was kind of old, and was located in a narrow three-story building that looked as if it would collapse if an earthquake hit. Recently, there had been quite a few regular patrons coming down here; late at night, the store became a place for musicians gather and hang around.

When Chiaki and I reached the store at nine, there was a large white-colored SUV parked in front of the store. Kagurazaka-senpai was just about to lift the drums into the boot. As for Mafuyu, she was sitting in the backseat, with her body sticking out of the car, watching Senpai load the instruments. However, when Mafuyu caught sight of me, she squeezed herself back inside.

"Morning! Hey you two, mind helping me carry the amplifiers?"

Senpai's forehead was covered with huge drops of sweat. That's quite a huge SUV we have here. Even with all the instruments piled up in the car, there was still some space left.

"Urm..... who's gonna drive? Can't be Senpai, right?"

I asked that as I helped carry the amplifiers. I had had an uneasy feeling inside of me ever since hearing about heading to the beach by car. Is it possible that Senpai actually owns a driving license?

"Hmm? We have our very own driver! He'll be picking us up on the way back as well."

"Huh?" Could it actually be the unlucky store owner?

Just then, some rumbling sounds came from inside the store, and a Marshall amplifier, about as tall as me, suddenly appeared before

my eyes. The person carrying it out of the store was a very tall man, probably in his twenties. There was a sharp gaze coming from behind his messy hair and bangs—I could even feel his gaze through his sunglasses. The relatively high bridge of his nose made him exceptionally striking.

"Hiroshi, I'll load the amplifiers. Go get the three guitars and place them beneath the seats."

"Alrighty."

The guy named Hiroshi gave a wry smile after hearing Senpai's instructions.

"Eh? Eh!" When she saw that person's face, Chiaki suddenly let go of the bass amplifier she was helping me carry. I barely managed to move the huge amplifier into the boot. What the hell, that's really dangerous!

"Hamasaka Hiroshi? A-Are you the real deal? Whoa!"

"Nah, I'm just your average driver for today." That Hiroshi guy removed his glasses and showed her a smile. Urm, who exactly is he?

"Chiaki, is he a friend of yours?"

"Nao, you don't know him?"



"Urm..... I'm sorry. I'm not too familiar with Japanese musicians."

"You don't really have to apologize to me in such a strange manner." Hiroshi laughed loudly and continued, "It's fine if you don't know me, as I'm from an underground band. In any case, you definitely won't be able to forget who I am—even if you tried to—once the live performance is over."

That made me feel even worse, so much that I curled myself up on my seat.

I was finally able to make heads and tails of things after piecing together the words of the rather emotional Chiaki, and the casual introduction from Senpai. It seemed Hiroshi was the lead singer in a band called Melancholy Chameleon. He had released albums via an

indie record label, and seemed to be involved in behind-the-scenes stuff like song recordings. Altogether, it meant he was a professional musician. He was also the one who invited us to be the guest performers, and it turned out the villa we were using was being loaned to us by him too. I could barely lift my head up when I learnt all that.

"How did you get stuck being our driver?"

Chiaki stuck her head in the space between the driver and co-driver seat and asked. The last row of seats was collapsed to make space for our luggage, and as a result, Chiaki, Mafuyu and I were all sitting shoulder-to-shoulder in the second row.

"Obviously because I lost a bet against Kyouko. The original condition stated I would have to lend you guys the villa for three days and two nights, which I thought was too good an offer. If I had known earlier, I wouldn't have offered to drive you all to the villa as well."

Ah, indeed..... so that's how it was huh?

"What did Senpai bet then?" Chiaki directed her question to Senpai, who was sitting in the co-driver seat.

"I told him I would offer myself to him for three days and two nights."

""Senpai!""

Chiaki and I yelled at the same time.

"Please treasure yourself more!"

Chiaki grabbed Senpai by her two arms and shook her gently.

"But it's impossible for me to lose to a person like Hiroshi. Thinking back, I shouldn't have agreed to just three days and two nights—instead, I should've signed a two-year contract with him."

"Don't be silly. That villa doesn't belong to me alone. I co-funded it with a group of people."

"How exactly did you guys carry out the bet?" I tried asking her for the details, as I was really interested in knowing why the heck she had so much confidence in herself.

"A karaoke duel. What a stupid guy he was for thinking he could

easily obtain high scores just because he's good at singing. In actual fact, there was no way he could even win against me, as I had already rigged the scoring system."

That's just despicable..... Why did you do that to a professional musician?

"Damn, shut up. I won't lose next time," Hiroshi tapped his palms against the steering wheel.

"Actually..... you lost the moment you allowed Senpai to decide the rules of the duel. I think it'd be better if you were more careful the next time around."

I couldn't help but give him that piece of advice, as I found him deserving of my pity.

"Really..... you've been fooled by her before?"

"Ah well..... urm....."

In the end, all Hiroshi did was flash a wry smile.



When the car entered the intersection, our conversation finally turned to music.

"It's always been my dream to play the guitar. However, Furukawa—oh, he's the guitarist of our band, by the way—says I suck at it, and thus, has banned me from the guitar. Then again, it seems like he's interested in being the lead singer, but he's not that good at singing. Because of that, we frequently poke fun at each other's poor techniques. Occasionally, we'll secretly switch our roles onstage as well."

He said the rest of the members that joined them later were their close friends. Which means, they have no relationship with the Melancholy Chameleon, right? I was slightly at ease. Even though they were an underground band, they were still professionals, and it would be quite intimidating to perform in front of them.

"You guys may be the opening act, but you can just relax with your performance."

"What do you mean by relax with our performance? No way. We'll

intoxicate the audience with our singing," Senpai retorted. Speaking of which, what sort of relationship does she share with Hiroshi? There were just too many mysteries regarding Senpai's social circle. Is she really just a high school student one year older than me?

"You always say you want to play guitar, but you always take the mike away to sing during your secret gigs. If you're not that confident in your guitar technique, shouldn't you concentrate on playing your guitar instead?"

Senpai's words were becoming increasingly sharp. In response, Hiroshi turned up the car stereo. There was a sudden loud blast from the speakers. I could hear cheers, background noises, and the drumsticks tapping out the countdown.

Next flowed the splendid but overly coarse sounds of the Les Paul guitar.

Then came the hoarse voice that sounded like fine liquor.

It was Okuda Tamio's live album—[**<Umi eto \(Into the Beach\)>**](#).^[1]

It felt like the instruments buried in our luggage were resonating to the sounds coming from the speakers, which caused the instruments to produce some noise.

Despite listening to the rough rock music, I was suddenly assaulted by a wave of intense sleepiness. It was probably because I stayed up late last night to pack my luggage.....?

There was a soundproof wall outside the car's window. The roofs of the cars that passed by our SUV glittered brightly under the rays of the sun. Above them was the sunny sky of summer that extended endlessly outwards. As for Mafuyu, who was sitting beside me—the color of her eyes was exactly the same as the color of the sky I was looking at.

I closed my eyes, and allowed my body to immerse itself in the voice of Okuda Tamio.



I woke up. Turning my head slightly, I could see Mafuyu's face right in front of me.

..... Eh?

She exchanged sights with me, and her face immediately turned red. I quickly raised my head up in shock—it was only then that I realized I had rested my head on Mafuyu's shoulder while I was asleep.

"..... S-Sorry."

"It's nothing. Oh, we've reached our destination."

Mafuyu suddenly looked out the window and mumbled..... we've reached?

"Hey, come help us unload the stuff if you're awake."

Chiaki pulled me by my ears all of a sudden, causing my drowsiness to disappear immediately.

"..... Wow....."

I couldn't help but exclaim in awe as I stepped out of the car.

Amid the sparse forestry that consisted of slender trees, stood a pure white villa, bathed in the rays of the sun that filtered through the trees. Past the trees behind the villa, I could see the beach.

After making our way past the villa and through the trees, we found ourselves standing on the edge of a cliff. The uneven stacks of boulders stretched their way to the far side, away from us. The rocky shores were jagged in shape, due to the constant erosion of the waves. The sea breeze carried the rich smell of the water as it blew against our faces; it felt really refreshing. Wait, can we actually swim here?

"It'd be troublesome for us if the villa was located next to a sandy beach, as there'd be lots of visitors around." That was the explanation Hiroshi gave us. "Don't worry though, the rocky shores are really fun too."

"I'll teach you guys how to head down to the shore later." And with that, Hiroshi led us back to the place the car was parked.

The villa looked just like a recording studio. When we stepped through the door, we could see an upright piano, a DJ mixer, microphone stands, studio monitors and recording devices—all located in the main hall. Hiroshi told us he had chipped in some

money together with a few of his musician friends to buy this villa. The use of this villa was then rotated among the individuals during summer, where it was used to make music or compose a few songs. I see, so that's the reason they chose such a remote place? This building stood alone among the trees next to the road; no other structures were visible from here.

The sofa and tables in the hall were placed up against the walls, making the place pretty spacious. Even so, the open space was significantly reduced when we finished moving the amplifiers and the drum set in. As a result, we could only have our meals out on the balcony. The ceiling of the main hall was made high, which was readily noticeable given the shape of the huge slanting roof of the building. Seems like the bedrooms are all located on the second floor.

"But we have a slight problem here....."

With the luggage out of the way, Hiroshi suddenly said something as we all quenched our thirst with some cold drinks,

"Well, since it's rare for us to sleep when we're here, we only constructed three bedrooms."

We looked at each other. It was obvious, even without counting, that there were four of us in the band. I then looked at the upper end of the spiraling staircase—there were indeed only three doors along the protruding walkway that extended out from the tall ceiling.

"Well..... what should we do about this?" I looked at Senpai and asked.

"Which means, the question now is—who should I sleep with, right?"

No, that's not it.

"Well, it'll be detrimental to our friendships if I sleep with either Comrade Ebisawa or Comrade Aihara..... It can't be helped. Young man!"

"Definitely no!" "What are you talking about, Senpai!" "That's probably the worst decision, isn't it!"

Senpai seemed to be really surprised when the three of us retorted at the same time. Hiroshi almost fell off the sofa laughing.

"Then..... young man, you shall decide who you want to sleep with."

"Enough! Let's not carry on with any more discussions about that."

The final decision was that I would sleep on the sofa in the hall.

Hiroshi then told us about the routes to the shores, a place where we could buy things, and so on. It was already noon by the time we were done with everything, and that meant it was time for lunch. However, Hiroshi entered the car and said it was about time for him to go.

"Urm..... I'll be preparing some food. So if you don't mind, how about joining us for lunch?"

Though he was doing it because he had lost a bet with Senpai, he was still loaning us the villa for free, and had even driven us all here. It just felt like we were chasing him away when he was no longer useful, and that didn't feel right.

"Nah, it's okay. I'll become really envious if I stay any longer."

Hiroshi rested his arm on the window of the driver's door and said that with a laugh. He then put on his sunglasses.

"Well then, I'll be coming here at noon the day after next to pick you guys up. Hey, Kyouko, make sure you clean up this place properly! I'm lending it to you all for free, but there are still some conditions attached."

And with that, he started the engine.

"Mmm, I know that, you loser."

Senpai's reply was pretty wicked as well.

"Thanks, Hamasaka."

Chiaki waved her hands energetically at the SUV moving away from us. Mafuyu remained silent.

"Well then....." Senpai turned around to face us all. "Comrade Ebisawa, please proceed with the opening speech for the training camp."

"..... Eh? M-Me?"

"Of course! You're the Chancellor of the Supreme Council! It's your

duty to say something at times like these."

"But....."

"Anything will do."

"Mmm....."

Mafuyu lowered her head and proceeded to draw a few circles on the sandy ground using the tip of her foot. Chiaki and Senpai maintained an upright standing posture while waiting for Mafuyu to deliver her speech. She suddenly lifted her head—probably because of the pressure coming from the two girls—and said,

"..... T-The training camp shall go on all the way till it is time for us to go home."

And what about after the training camp's over?



Chiaki willfully insisted that we have our lunch at the beach.

"There are plenty of books that say the sea breeze increases the taste of the onigiri by multiple-fold!"

"We'd have to wait till two if we started preparing the rice now. How about sandwiches instead?"

"Uhh—can't help it. I'll give in this time."

What's with that smug look on your face!

"How about we change out of our clothes while we wait?"

"Hold on a second. What's with the sudden desire to swim? What exactly are you here for?"

"To swim and suntan?"

It's to practice! Just as I was about to say that out loud, I saw Kagurazaka-senpai come out of the storeroom with a parasol and a rolled-up mat in her hands.

"So you guys are that excited about swimming!?"

"We can practice after the sun's set, so we should swim while the sun's still up. Isn't that right?"

Well, you're not wrong—no wait, can't fall into her trap.

"Alright, change out of your clothes, Comrade Ebisawa. I'll help rub the suntan lotion over every inch of your body."

With her intentions fully exposed for all to see, Kagurazaka-senpai grabbed Mafuyu by her hand. However, Mafuyu shook her head.

"I hate the sea."

"Why?"

"And I have never swum before. I'm scared."

"No problem. The shores here aren't shallow, so you won't be stepping on anything before long—there's no chance of you stepping on sea urchins."

Chiaki, why are you scaring her like that? Mafuyu remained seated on the sofa and shook her head. I actually thought a little bit about it though—heading to swim right now instead of starting off with practice did seem to be a pretty good idea, as it might help Mafuyu to settle down a little. However, that didn't seem to be the case.

"To think that we had specially purchased our swimsuits together," Chiaki complained while puffing her cheeks.

Senpai heaved a loud sigh, then said,

"Mmm, I get it. It'd be pointless for us to go to the beach if Comrade Ebisawa doesn't want to go. Let's start practicing after lunch. We can leave the swimming for later—when we're all sweating after our practice."

Chiaki began to tune the drum set in the main hall while Senpai tinkered around with the effects unit. As for me, I made my way into the kitchen. The kitchen was a small area right next to the main hall. Sadly, there was no gas, only an electric stove. Thankfully though, there was a large frying pan, which could come in handy if I wanted to make omelettes.

Just as I was about to drain the lettuce dry, the sound of the waves of the sea came in through the ventilators. I see, the kitchen's facing the sea. It was a real shame I wasn't able to see Mafuyu in her swimsuit..... I recalled the phone call from Chiaki. In the end, she never mailed me that photo—what sort of swimsuit did they buy?

"..... Need my help?" Mafuyu's voice came from behind me all of a sudden, causing me to nearly drop the cooking chopsticks on the floor.

"Eh? Ah, n-nah. It's fine."

"Why are you so surprised?"

I can't possibly say I was imagining you in a swimsuit, can I?

Since Mafuyu didn't use any effects units, she had already finished her tuning and had nothing to do. Then again, there wasn't much she could help me with for the sandwiches anyway.

"You cook frequently at home as well? Your father said something about it in one of his articles."

"Yeah. Tetsurou lacks all sorts of life skills."

Why did he write about his son cooking at home in his article? I really didn't understand, but something else intrigued me even more: why did the publisher continue to assign work to Tetsurou, who constantly wrote about stuff like this?

I began to think about Mafuyu's rather amazing life as I peeled the lettuce. It seemed like that was how pure pianists were raised and bred—they were not to injure their fingers no matter what, so they were banned from stepping in the kitchen.

How much despair did she experience when she lost the most important thing in her life—the piano? Or perhaps, she didn't feel any despair at all?

"So..... I do not really know what I should do."

Mafuyu said that as she squatted down at the door connecting the kitchen to the main hall. It felt like there was a deeper meaning to what she said—she wasn't just referring to work in the kitchen.

I guess—she must've been alone this whole time. A pianist is at his loneliest not when he is practicing alone, or when he is recording; he is at his loneliest when he is sitting in front of the orchestra, listening to the cello solo in the **third movement** of Johannes Brahms' **<Piano Concerto No. 2>**—that was something I had read in a certain biography.

However, Mafuyu wasn't by herself anymore, and I hoped she

could realize that.

Still..... is it really possible? Can I make her understand that in three days, before the training camp is over?



If you asked who in the band moved the most—the answer would, without a doubt, be the drummer.

"But even so, you don't have to drum while wearing your swimsuit! Go change!"

"But it's so hot!"

After taking a short break after lunch, we immediately began our practice. The ventilation in the villa's main hall was pretty good, so it felt pretty comfortable even without any air conditioning. Even so, Chiaki, who sat between the drums and who was exercising her whole body, was already drenched in sweat. She changed into a bikini for her upper body, but still wore a pair of shorts on her lower body. I could catch glimpses of her sakura-pink bikini and her glistening skin—shining due to the sweat—through the drum set, and because of that, I was unable to concentrate even a single bit, resulting in me playing a few notes wrong.

During the practice, Senpai had repeatedly stopped our playing, which rarely ever happened. She then actually said this: "Everyone, just change into your swimwear!"

"Is there any point in doing this?"

"So we can feel the warmth of each other through our skin."

That's the logic? That will make me play worse, so no thanks.

However, I knew Senpai wasn't pausing practice because I was making mistakes. Senpai turned down the volume of her guitar and placed her guitar on the stand. She then walked towards the other side of the hall—towards Mafuyu, who was leaning against the back of her chair. Mafuyu glanced at Senpai before shifting her gaze back to the Stratocaster guitar in her hands.

"Comrade Ebisawa, you have two options right now....."

Senpai raised two of her fingers and showed them to Mafuyu.

Mafuyu's body flinched.

"One: change into your swimsuit so we can feel the warmth of each other through our skin....."

"..... No."

"Or two: stop rushing ahead by yourself. You're not the only one playing."

Mafuyu sat down on the sofa. Despite her grumpily nodding her head, she didn't once look straight into Senpai's eyes.

Senpai stared at Mafuyu's forehead for a long while, then suddenly turned her body away.

"Let's take a fifteen-minute break to calm down."

And with that, she opened the glass door and stepped onto the balcony.

I had no idea what to say, and I couldn't get close to Mafuyu either. All I did was turn down the volume of my bass and place it on the stand; I then squatted down on the small carpet.

"Hey, Mafuyu....."

I lifted my head in surprise when I heard Chiaki speak. At the same time, I saw Mafuyu looking in the direction of the drums with an expression similar to mine.

"You performed much better on the day you first played together with us, you know?"

Isn't that a little too harsh and direct? But I felt the same way as well, and I believed Mafuyu knew it too.

It was on the sixth of July that the four of us played together for the very first time. We had yet to achieve the same standard of playing we had demonstrated in the <Kashmir> I had shown Ebichiri. How exactly did we manage to reach that standard back then? There was a sudden silence amid the stale hot air in the hall, which caused me to subconsciously remember the heat I had experienced back then.

Mafuyu and I exchanged sights for a brief moment. Even though she lowered her head instantly, I knew she, too, was also reminiscing about that time, as her eyes were fixated on my bass—a

unique bass that I had customized all over again, to match the timbre of Mafuyu's guitar.

No, I should say..... it wasn't just me. Because there were four of us.

"I know," Mafuyu murmured.

"Then..... why can't we replicate our performance back then?"

Chiaki walked to Mafuyu's side and stuck her face close to Mafuyu's, to stare at her. Mafuyu turned her head away to look out the window.

"Back then, I wasn't—"

Mafuyu stopped abruptly. Back then, you weren't?

"You weren't—thinking about all these things that are troubling you?"

Chiaki knelt down in front of Mafuyu and finished Mafuyu's sentence for her. Seeing Mafuyu nod, Chiaki then went a step further.

"You know..... you can just forget about those troublesome things when you're playing with the band!"

Mafuyu didn't offer Chiaki a reply. Instead, she once again shifted her gaze back to her guitar. She swung the hand holding the pick, and a series of semiquavers flowed out from the high octaves, sounding just like the screech produced when a glass surface is scratched—it was the opening of the song **<He Man Woman Hater>** by Extreme. Back when I lent this CD to Mafuyu, she seemed to be particularly fond of the opening sequence of the song, which employed elements of the baroque organ. It wasn't long before she had practiced it to perfection. The scary thing was, in the original version, the opening of the song was played utilizing the delay of the dotted notes, and was dependent on the effects unit; however, Mafuyu managed to play out each and every note using only her hands. I hugged my knees silently, and immersed myself in the sounds of her guitar as they rained down on me.

Mafuyu was already so incredible by herself—

Her reason to be in the band, and the things she worried about—

perhaps it's actually me who should be thinking about all these things instead? Is the unstable sound of Mafuyu's guitar a consequence of me being unable to catch up to her?

Suddenly, a series of metallic clashes overlapped with the sounds of the guitar. It was Chiaki. Unknown to me, she had already made her way back to her seat at the drums, and was stepping on the pedals of the cymbals in a sixteen-beat tempo to match Mafuyu. Mafuyu's guitar picked up speed, as though it were trying to break itself free of the tempo.

I picked up my bass again, and turned up the volume as I prepared to intervene in the duel between the two. However, I couldn't do it. Where exactly should I step in, and using which note? I was clueless.

It was because I couldn't follow their pace—

I let out a sigh and placed my bass on the sofa.

The words Senpai had said to me some time ago reverberated in my ears again: You aren't following us! You are our heart. You made it sound real easy, but.....

"Alright, halt!"

Senpai's words forced themselves between Mafuyu's guitar and Chiaki's drums. Even though she wasn't using a mike, her voice managed to get the two girls to halt their performance in shock and turn their heads around. Senpai had re-entered the main hall without us noticing. She then removed her T-shirt, revealing only a blue bikini covering her upper body. I reflexively shielded my face with my hands. Is she for real?

"Ah well, let's just start with this song then. Comrade Aihara, please continue the sixteen-beat tempo. Young man, what are you waiting for? Hurry up and—"

"Urm, eh? S-Should I change into my swimwear as well?"

"Hmm? I'm referring to your bass."

Whoa! Damn, that was a really embarrassing misunderstanding. It's your fault for bringing that up earlier!

"I won't stop you if you want to change into your swimwear here."

"I never said that!"



I quickly slipped my arm through the strap of the bass. Chiaki

began stepping on the pedals once again. The irritating tempo sounded as though someone had increased the speed of the ticking of the clock, causing the atmosphere of the main hall to instantly become tense.

"Comrade Ebisawa, come here for a moment."

Mafuyu was slightly surprised by Senpai's instruction. Senpai then asked Mafuyu to head right in front of the bass's amplifiers, and urged Mafuyu on with her hands. She then suddenly hugged Mafuyu—who was still carrying her guitar on her back—tightly from behind.

"Eh? A-ah!"

Mafuyu twisted her body about as she shrieked. What the hell is Senpai doing? Just as I was about to run towards Mafuyu, Senpai shot a fierce gaze at me with those beast-like eyes of hers, causing my legs to ignore my commands.

Senpai continued to tightly hug Mafuyu by her slender waist, using her left arm; she had no intention of letting go.

"Young man, the beats."

Even if she says that, what should I play?

"Anything is fine. We'll go along with you."

I shifted my gaze away from Senpai's face and exchanged sights with Chiaki. Her eyes were telling me "Idiot! Hurry up and play!"

I gave up and muted my bass. I paced myself to Chiaki's beats, then began playing the nearly scaleless opening with the dotted rhythms, which sounded like someone punching his fist against a stomach.

"L-let me go!"

Senpai was still holding tightly onto Mafuyu's right hand. Mafuyu was struggling really hard. Is there really a meaning behind all this? I continued playing with an uneasy feeling. It was obvious Chiaki was really fired up though, as her tempo was slowly picking up speed.

"Nope. Listen carefully."

I could hear Senpai's calm voice amid the beats.

"Music existed way before you were born, and will continue to exist

even after you die. So, you don't have to worry. Just relax and listen. Even if you're not playing right now, you should still be able to hear the sounds you played earlier."

Mafuyu stopped struggling.

Just then, I heard it as well—like a surge of electricity, the reverberations of Mafuyu's guitar were wandering between the melodies of Chiaki and me.

"Can you hear it?"

For some unknown reason, I could even hear Senpai's soft murmurs as she whispered behind Mafuyu's ears. Mafuyu nodded her head with a blushing face.

"Do you want to play?"

I didn't catch Mafuyu's reply to Senpai's soft questioning this time around—or at the very least, I didn't notice she had nodded her head in response. The rhythm would become unstable if I didn't focus my attention on my hands.

"Mmm, but this still isn't enough....." Senpai said teasingly, and with that, she took the pick away from Mafuyu's right fingers. "I still can't let you play yet."

Senpai grabbed onto Mafuyu even tighter when she turned her head around. At the same time, the imagined sounds of Mafuyu's guitar were becoming clearer and clearer. I released the mute, allowing the bass to release its clear sounds..... Right there! Mafuyu's guitar should be joining in right there. Each and every descending note I played thereafter called out to Mafuyu—it was like they were slowly pumping blood into her limbs.

"Not yet..... Hold on, we're reaching there soon....."

In response to Senpai's low voice, Mafuyu's sweaty left hand was twiddling the six strings of her guitar. The interweaving noise was sandwiched between Chiaki and I, and the throbbing deepened. Is it not time yet? The pair of hands still isn't moving yet?

"Right, hold on..... Mmm, let's go..... 2, 3, 4"

Chiaki and I held on to our breaths as an electrifying sound blared out from the amplifiers of the guitar. The remnants of the opening of

<He Man Woman Hater> in my ears became clear again, as though the missing pieces were completely filled in.

I raised my head as a chill ran through my body. There was a certain someone in front of the amplifiers—the silhouette of the person holding the guitar slowly became clearer and clearer. The fair fingers danced between the six strings while the slightly darker fingers held on to the pick and strummed the guitar around the pickup, creating an intense and incredible melody. I knew Mafuyu was the one pressing the chords with her left hand, while Senpai—who was hugging her from behind—was the one strumming the strings with her right hand. But..... how the hell did they do that? Is that really Mafuyu and Senpai, and not some unknown person whose name I don't even know?

No, I know her. While strumming my bass with my fingertips, constantly sending blood to her body, I realized I already knew what her name was—feketerigó.

She's right here—

The pleasant and numbing series of running notes had finally turned into tapping arpeggios. Senpai's fingers struck the strings with great intensity during the opening rhythm, and Mafuyu's fingers replied with three different notes, which sounded perfectly harmonious with the elaborate rhythms created by Chiaki and me. As the harmony gradually changed, a set of triplets leapt past the difference in the pitch of the scales in a single shot, as though it were streaking through torrential rain. What followed immediately afterwards was another set of incredibly strong triplets that stopped the rhythm.

And then, a moment of silence descended on the main hall—

"No, mmmm~"

Mafuyu let out a sweet moan, surprising me. I gathered my senses and took a quick look—Senpai, who was still hugging Mafuyu tightly from behind, had suddenly pulled away Mafuyu's long maroon-colored hair, and had started nibbling softly on her earlobe. What the heck is she doing!?

"Senpai! Geez—" Chiaki rushed towards them to pry them apart, almost knocking down the drum set in the process. Mafuyu finally regained her freedom, and the first thing she did was hide herself

behind my back and stare at Senpai with a teary expression, just like that of a cat that had almost drowned.

"I really can't afford to be negligent around you!"

"Sorry sorry. I couldn't hold on any longer, so I accidentally....."

"Accidentally my ass!"

I couldn't help but retort her. What exactly is going through your mind during practice!?

"I mean, there's a delicious-looking pair of ears swaying in front of my eyes, yeah? Young man, you should know what I mean!"

"Who knows what you mean!? Don't drag me down with you!"

"Stupid Senpai! I've already told you you're not allowed to do such things as you please!"

In response to our rage, Senpai replied similarly to how a child throwing a tantrum would,

"But, it felt really comfortable just now, you know? Of course, I'm not talking about it in a sexual manner....."

"There was no need for that strange addition!"

Mafuyu moaned with an "Uhh—". Seemed like she had no intention of leaving my back just yet. I was surprised by her flushed face and teary eyes.

"I'm sorry. Next time, I'll remember to bite Comrade Aihara's ears too. There there, hurry up and return to your drums."

That sexual harasser. Chiaki returned to her seat at the drum set rather unwillingly after she was patted on the head. As for Senpai, she just laughed it off and walked back to her guitar.

I could still feel the remains of the throbbing and the heat in the surroundings of the hall, as well as inside myself.

So..... I guess that's how it is?

Senpai slipped her Les Paul guitar onto her shoulder. The instant she lifted the pick in her hand—there was no exchange of words, and no need for a countdown. We exchanged sights briefly—it felt like a jolt of electricity had run through us. Then, the perfectly synchronized playing began. The heavy beats, the riffs with the

sextuplets slipped in, and also—even though I didn't play this song much, the melody of the bass naturally flowed from my fingertips. Mafuyu's guitar solo wove out a rainbow bridge from the peak of our integrated music. Senpai didn't use a mike, but the singing voice of <He Man Woman Hater> had definitely made its way vividly into our ears.

I could feel the warm body on my back. It was Mafuyu. She was right there. Before we knew it, we were no longer separated by a thick door. I could finally come into direct contact with her, and somehow, it felt like I could even hear the sound of her heartbeat.

It was a real pity we didn't record the session that day.



Night came rather quickly.

In the end, we didn't go to the beach that day—there was no time for us to do so, as nearly all our time was spent practicing. Even if one of us called for a rest, Mafuyu would hold on to her guitar and not let go. She would then wander around the drum set, as though she had something to say, and after a while, she would begin strumming a rhythmic jam session. Once she started playing her guitar, Chiaki would join in on the drums; then, practice would start again..... this process repeated itself all the way till night time.

When night descended, our only source of light was a single candle placed on the table on the balcony. The candlelight shone on Mafuyu's face, which was pressed against the neck of her guitar and facing downwards. She just came out of the shower, right? A towel still hung off her shoulders, and her wet hair was draped over it. A refreshing gust of wind blew through the comfortable shade of the night.

Is she thinking of something? Mafuyu finally raised her head when I placed a cup of Oolong tea on the table.

"There's sugar added to this."

"..... Thank you."

After thanking me with a soft voice, Mafuyu grabbed the cup with a complicated expression on her face, and took a sip from it.

"Is it nice drinking it sweet? Wouldn't the Oolong tea taste disgusting with sugar added to it?"

She suddenly lifted her head and looked at me with her eyebrows raised.

"Have you tried it before?"

"Nope, never."

"Then don't belittle Oolong tea with sugar added to it! Try it before coming to a conclusion."

Mafuyu stared at the cup of Oolong tea in my hand. Mine obviously had no sugar in it—I guess this is probably what you would call a cultural difference? I sat down quietly and took a gulp of my tea.

After putting the cup down, I allowed the night breeze to caress my hot arms and legs as it pleased. It somehow felt as though the asphyxiating sounds were still reverberating in my body.

Could Mafuyu understand my feelings as well? I sneaked a sideways glance. Her face looked furious. She suddenly covered my head with the towel that was on her shoulders.

"..... What's with this!?"

"Because you have a really smug expression on your face!" She was angry. "I-It's not your win yet! The victory has not been decided!"

And with that, Mafuyu went back to staring at her palms again. What a stubborn person she is.....

"Still..... everything's good. I feel at ease now," I sighed.

"Why?"

"Because music never lies."

Somehow..... it felt like there wouldn't be any problems in the future if we could continue to play this sort of music. Mafuyu kicked me hard in the calves a few times. That hurts! What the heck are you doing!

"Don't be so complacent!"

Mafuyu picked up her guitar and turned her body away in a fit of anger. She would probably become angrier if I laughed right this

moment, right? So, to stifle my laughter, I brought the cup of Oolong tea to my mouth.

"I'm just not thinking about other things when I am playing the guitar."

"Because you feel really happy when you're playing the guitar?"

She was silent for quite a while, and had an unhappy expression on her face; then, she finally gave a slight nod. Isn't that great? I think that should be all there is to it.

The glass door was pushed open, and Chiaki walked out of the hall as she dried her hair with a towel.

"Right, you guys know where Senpai is?" Chiaki asked after sitting down in the chair next to me. "She asked me to tell her when everyone was done with their baths, but she's not in her room."

She probably went somewhere. Then again, there was only the forest, the beach and the road nearby, so there weren't many places she could go.

"Should I take a bath ahead of her then?"

"You can't! Nao has to clean the bathroom and wash our clothes, so you have to bathe last!"

"Oh yeah....."

..... I accepted her explanation, but..... something feels wrong somewhere? Why are all the jobs thrown at me?

"Where exactly did she go—"

We looked in the direction of the fence around the balcony, and into the vast dark forest.

The sound of leaves brushing suddenly came from the back of the villa. Chiaki ran to the edge of the balcony and stuck her body out.

"Senpai!"

A silhouette appeared from the darkness—it was Kagurazaka-senpai. She had let down her hair instead of tying it up as usual, causing the contours of her silhouette to become blurred. She was holding her guitar by the neck, allowing the body of the guitar to hang freely below her.

"Where did you go?"

"The beach."

Senpai said softly, showing a weak smile. The beach? But it's already dark out there?

When I returned to the balcony with Senpai and Chiaki's cups of Oolong tea in my hands, Senpai was already sitting in the chair opposite of where I was sitting earlier.

"Did something happen?"

"Mmm....." Senpai looked into the sky as she pondered on how to continue her sentence. "One song's not enough. But at a time like this....."

I sat opposite of Senpai, and saw an empty score next to the candle. She's still composing? But we're less than two weeks away from the actual performance.

"Fifty minutes should be a breeze if it's just a jam session, right?" Chiaki said. "Not only is Senpai here, but Mafuyu's around as well. It should be a piece of cake for us to play for fifty minutes if we're on a high."

It was definitely possible for Chiaki and Mafuyu to play on and on if no one interrupted them.

"All I've done is bring the score here."

Senpai stretched herself hesitantly.

"I feel like inserting a slow song in the middle. I was thinking I should be able to come up with something if I soak myself in the sea at night..... But I couldn't come up with anything, even after making my way down to the shore."

"That's dangerous! Please don't do that again!"

She was someone who would actually jump into the sea with her guitar on her, so that was quite scary.

"The current me is spoilt for choice."

She said that while staring at the water droplets running down the surface of the glass cup. Spoilt for choice?

"The things we can do now, and the things we can't..... I want to

try them all. I mean, it's rare for us to get fifty minutes of performance time."

I thought about it for a while. This'll be our very first live performance, so there's no need for you to go all out for it, right?

"How about we perform some songs by The Eagles? I want to try playing <Desperado>. It should be fine for us to do a cover or two in our performance, right?"

We've always warmed up playing various songs by The Eagles, but why hadn't we played that song before? It was a song I really liked..... but Senpai shook her head gloomily.

"We won't perform that song."

I was surprised at how straightforward Senpai was in her objection to my suggestion.

"Why?"

"I can't exactly say why. And it's not like I really like The Eagles either."

"Urm....." Then..... why are we always practicing their songs? But I could somewhat understand after Senpai said that. Senpai's preference was skewed towards the hard rock of the early days, when the guitar and the bass played together in unison. In contrast, The Eagles was a band that composed melodies that were pleasing to the ears, and their songs had a mature air about them. This rock band—that had released award-winning singles one after another—was kind of an extreme counter example to what she liked.

"What sort of song is that?" Mafuyu, who was sitting next to me, asked.

"Well....."

I was certain the song was in the iPod I brought..... but I swallowed back the words that were about to come out of my mouth. The opening of the song was played by a piano. Somehow, it didn't feel like it'd be a good idea to let Mafuyu listen to that song.

I borrowed Mafuyu's guitar and tried my hardest to recall the fingering I wasn't too familiar with. I began playing <Desperado>. The cheers followed right after the end of the opening melody.

Desperado. Why didn't I notice it sooner?

You been out ridin' fences for so long now—

A hand suddenly stretched out in my direction and grabbed hold of the neck of the guitar, with my left hand still on it. That shocked me. I shut my mouth, lifted my head up, and saw Senpai right in front of me. She had stretched over the table, from the opposite side, to stop me from playing any further.

"..... Senpai?"

I couldn't even speak, due to my shock—instead, Chiaki was the one who let out a tiny whimper in my stead. I couldn't pry my gaze away from Senpai's eyes. It was as though the darkness in her eyes was swallowing me up.

What's..... going on?

"Ah, nothing. Sorry."

Senpai forced a smile and released her hand. I was certain that smile was a facade.

"I really..... don't wanna hear that. Not because young man's bad at singing, or because you're playing the guitar badly."

"But he was playing the guitar badly."

Mafuyu mumbled. Sorry about that! Forget it, I won't play anymore. Suffering a blow to my self-esteem, I pushed the Stratocaster back into Mafuyu's hands.

Senpai stood up. Her long hair spread out behind her back.

"I'll be back after a shower. Young man, it's about time you decide who you'll be sleeping with."

"I already said I'll be sleeping on the sofa below!"

Senpai laughed and waved her hand gently, then disappeared into the other side of the glass door. Geez.....

What was going on with Senpai just now?

For a moment, her eyes—there seemed to be a hint of loneliness in them.



I cleaned the bathroom after I finished showering. As for the clothes I should've been washing—hold on a second, is that group of girls actually expecting me to wash their swimsuits as well? Please consider for a moment that I'm a guy here, yeah!?

After I finished the chores, I returned to the hall. There was no one to be seen among the guitar stands and amplifiers and stuff. The air felt slightly cold. Even though it was summer, the temperature dropped considerably at night.

Speaking of which, I was supposed to sleep on the sofa, but there weren't any pillows or blankets in the main hall. I'll probably catch a cold if I fall asleep without them. There should be spare blankets in the bedrooms, right?

I was a little troubled when I made my way to the second floor—I had no idea who was staying in what room. Ah, whatever. I'm just here to borrow some blankets anyway.

I knocked on the door closest to the stairs.

"..... It's not locked."

Came a weak-sounding voice. Mmm, it's Mafuyu huh? I was strangely nervous when I opened the door.

"W-Why are you here?"

Looked like she was nervous as well. Mafuyu was sitting on her bed in her green pajamas. The room was all dark. She had curled herself up and was staring in my direction as she hugged her pillow.

"Urm..... are there any spare blankets around? I want to borrow one from you."

Mafuyu nodded her head and pointed at the door of the storage space. She then shifted her eyes back to the screen of the handphone she was holding..... Hmm?

"You brought your handphone here?"

I remembered her saying she didn't when I had asked her earlier.

"Papa wanted me to bring it along. But I don't really know how to use it."

"Ah, I see." That was something to be expected from Ebichiri, who doted on his daughter a little too much.

"And I do not really know how to store phone numbers....."

"Wait a bit."

I walked downstairs to grab my handphone. Then, after returning, I keyed in the number Mafuyu told me and called it. The default ringtone rang from Mafuyu's handphone.

"Y-Ya!"

Mafuyu almost dropped her phone in panic, but I managed to catch it before it hit the ground. My phone number appeared on the LCD screen of the phone.

"..... Should I help you store this number?"

"Mmm."

As I was exchanging numbers with her and teaching her how to store the number in her phone, a heavy-sounding orchestral ringtone rang from Mafuyu's phone.

"..... It's from Papa," Mafuyu pouted.

What piece is that..... Gluck's opera? It was the aria sung by the character Agamemnon in <Iphigénie en Aulide>—*Ah, my lovely daughter*. Looks like Ebichiri has already stored his number in Mafuyu's handphone, and set a customized ringtone for it. I had never seen a father who doted on his own daughter as much as he did.

"..... Hello?"

"Mafuyu? Is that Mafuyu? You're still awake? There's a time difference of fourteen hours..... Isn't it twelve midnight over there already!?"

Mafuyu received the phone call by placing her handphone next to her ears. Ebichiri's voice came out of the speakers right after; he was so loud even I could hear him. Damn, you're noisy. If you know it's midnight here, lower your volume already. Mafuyu knitted her brows and tossed the handphone to the other side of the bed.

"I am about to go to sleep."

She said softly towards the phone, which had rolled all the way to the end of the bed.

"Are your fingers alright? Did you apply an ice compress on them? You didn't go down to the beach and play in the water, right? The sea breeze is bad for your skin and your hair, so you will have to—"

How can she converse with him with the phone so far away?

"Mmm, I'm fine."

"Do not even think of not covering yourself with a blanket when you sleep, just because it's summer. How is the place you're staying at? Do they have beds there? You guys are not sleeping together with mattresses laid on the floor, right? I-It can't be that you're sharing a room with Hikawa's son, right?"

Mafuyu answered him with an irritated expression on her face,

"Mmm, he's currently right next to me."

Ebichiri's voice became strange, sounding something like a lion gritting its teeth, so Mafuyu tossed her pillow at the phone to knock it off the bed. She then swiftly proceeded to power it off, though it looked more like she was about to stomp on it with her foot. The bedroom fell into silence once again.

"..... It'll be really troublesome later on, right?"

"Who cares. I do not really care what that person thinks."

Seems like there's still quite some distance to go before the Ebisawa father and daughter can reconcile.

"But how could he hear you despite you being that far away from the phone?"

"Papa specially ordered this custom-made phone for me. He says it would be dangerous if my two hands were tied down when I used the phone. Therefore, he wanted the phone to be usable even if it were hanging off my neck or placed next to the table."

Ah, I see. Mafuyu could only hold the phone with her left hand, since her right fingers were immobile; so both her hands would be occupied when the phone was in use. But to include microphones with that sort of performance just for that reason alone..... isn't that a little too extreme?

"I think it has all sorts of secondary functions as well—like the ability to retaliate against molesters."

Rather than pitying Ebichiri, I think it was Mafuyu who deserved more pity—it was a real pain to have that type of parent. Now's not the time for me to be talking about others though—this time, it was my handphone that was ringing. I glanced at the screen and briefly wondered if I should just ignore the call. However, things might've become even more troublesome if I ignored it, so I chose to pick up instead.

"..... What?"

"Eh? Ah, nothing. I heated the bathing water myself, and even finished brushing my teeth. I just want Nao to praise me a little."

Upon hearing Tetsurou's strangely happy voice, my mood plummeted all the way down to the bottom.

"Fine, go to sleep already."

"But it feels so empty sleeping by myself. At least say 'good night' to me or something!"

And so, I switched my handphone off as well. I was irritated to the point that I had no idea what I should say next.

Mafuyu let out a giggle while sitting next to me on the bed. She had finally laughed. Perhaps Tetsurou's idiocy isn't totally bad after all.

Is now the right time for me to talk to her about it? About the things Ebichiri told me, as well as the things about the piano.....

"What?"

Noticing my gaze, Mafuyu returned to her serious expression. I quickly shifted my eyes away. How should I start?

Just then, a series of footsteps came from outside the door. The doorknob twisted, and I stood up in surprise as the door suddenly flung open.

In the next instant, a patch of white suddenly obscured my sight—something impacted my face right after, causing me to fall backwards.

"Sneak attack successful—eh? What's Nao doing in Mafuyu's room?"

Chiaki's question landed on us. I sat myself up, and looked at the thing that fell on my stomach. I finally realized the thing that flew

towards me was a pillow.

"..... W-What's going on?"

Mafuyu's uneasy voice came from behind me.

"What else? A pillow fight, of course! It's the night of the training camp right now. Are you really going to sleep now?"

"Night is the time for us to sleep."

"Too naive! Hey Nao, move away!" Chiaki was wearing a set of loose-fitting pajamas. She stepped past my body to pick up the pillow. She then used daijodan Judo techniques and began her assault on Mafuyu, swinging the pillow downwards from above her head. Please, I beg you, quiet down a little! Just then, Chiaki suddenly turned her body to face away, and knocked down an incoming pillow with her arm.

"As expected from a Judo expert. It's like there are eyes on the back of your head."

Senpai, who was standing next to the door, had put on a fearless smile on her face. I was strangely tired all of a sudden, and the only thing that went through my head was something like "So Senpai's pajamas are blue huh."

"Senpai, you're really despicable to sneak an attack on me like that!"

Look who's talking. Didn't you do the same to me?

"Right, so that means young man has decided to sleep together with Comrade Ebisawa?"

"T-That's not....." "Not at all!"

Mafuyu and I objected at the same time, but we didn't continue on after that. Because Chiaki had picked up the pillow again and slammed it in my face at full force. "Geez! Stupid Nao!"

And with that, Senpai came into the bedroom as well, marking the official start of the pillow fight. All Mafuyu did was hide herself on the other side of the bed—the only things she did were defend herself and retaliate, throwing the pillows back in the direction they came from. She was quite accurate with her throws—though most her throws were directed at me.

Notes

1. First part of the performance is the song mentioned here. Also, wiki link on [Okuda Tamio](#).

Chapter 6 - So As Not To Wake Up From the Dream

I woke up to the sounds of the piano.

I could clearly see the grain of the tall wooden ceiling, but for a brief moment, I wasn't sure where I was. I tried to sit up, but I nearly fell off the sofa instead. The blankets were on the floor—perhaps I kicked them off because of the heat?

Hmm? The pillow fight..... what time did we play till? My memory was a blur, as I was exhausted back then. I didn't even remember making my way back to the hall to sleep.

I sat up on the sofa. My view reached all the way to the other side of the hall, and I saw the back of someone with long black hair sitting in front of the piano. It was Kagurazaka-senpai. She used her slender fingers to tap the keys of the piano as lightly as she could, as though she were trying to write on the surface of water. Her singing voice, overlapping with the sounds of the piano, sounded much more tender than usual.

I fixed my sight on her long hair, which swayed to the rhythm of the song, until the song was over.

"..... Morning! You were sleeping really soundly. Were you that exhausted?"

Once she finished playing the song, Senpai stood up from her chair and turned around to look at me.

"The look of your sleeping face is just too cute. I was deliberating between punching or kissing you awake. In the end, I chose to wake you up with my singing instead."

Why weren't there options that were much more normal?

"Senpai, you know how to play the piano too?"

"Me? Well, not really."

Senpai closed the lid of the keyboard quietly, then walked in my

direction and sat down on the sofa next to me.

"How was it?"

"How was what?"

"You were listening the whole time, right?"

"..... A new song? The one you mentioned yesterday."

Senpai nodded. I lifted my leg onto the sofa, and swallowed the words I was about to say. How should I go about saying this?

"Somehow, it feels like..... it's overly done?"

"Hmm?"

"The tune is beautiful, but it sounds like the school anthem of some middle school. We'll just bore our audience if we perform that on stage."

Senpai laughed heartily.

"Those are some interesting words you're using there, young man..... but I get what you mean. This song won't do." Senpai leaned against the sofa and looked up. "How stupid of me to be thinking about such things right now. I was thinking..... that the piece would be better if Comrade Ebisawa was the one playing the piano."

"Well....."

It's..... probably me thinking too much into things? But I don't think the piano should be used for that song.

"Hey, young man. I think I've managed to gather the best members for the band. But that makes me spoilt for choice, and I'm slowly unable to find my own music. What irony. It feels so painful—just because I'm no longer alone; just because there are people around me who can do the things I can't do."

What's happening? Why is she saying all this all of a sudden?

"Senpai, you've been acting strange since yesterday."

"Hmm, really?"

Senpai let out her usual laugh, though it seemed a little forced.

"Don't you worry! I'm really happy to be able to partake in a training camp with you guys!"

Senpai then stood up and said, with an exceptionally cheerful voice,

"Young man, I'm hungry. Comrade Aihara should be back from her jog soon, so hurry up and start preparing our breakfast! I'll go wake Comrade Ebisawa with a morning kiss."

Just as I was about to block Senpai from making her way to the stairs, the door of a room on the second floor opened. Mafuyu walked out in her pajamas, rubbing her sleepy-looking eyes. That was close.



"We must have onigiri at the beach today!"

Chiaki said that immediately after we were done with our morning practice. Yes yes yes, I get it.

"I knew you'd say that, so I've already cooked the rice. I've also already filled the flasks with tea."

"Wow, that's impressive of you, Nao. Do you have ESP or something? How did you know I wanted to go to the beach for lunch?"

"Looking at you, it couldn't be more obvious. You've already inflated the swimming tubes, right?"

"Young man, prepare more omelettes. The dishes you make with eggs are really something!"

Senpai began taking the beach equipment—which included a foldable deck chair—out of the storeroom as she said that. These girls are really hyped about playing huh..... didn't you say a single song wasn't enough?

"We have to play when it's time to play! It's not like inspiration will come to me if I lock myself in a room and cry!"

While preparing the rice in the kitchen, I heard the footsteps of two people making their way up the stairs; and not long after, I heard them coming back down.

"Nao, look here!" A voice called out to me from behind.

I stuck my head out to look into the hall, and what appeared before

me was Chiaki and Senpai in their swimsuits. Uwaa! Though I had seen them in half of that attire yesterday, the impact of seeing them in their full swimsuits was completely different from before.

Chiaki's swimsuit included a sarong around her waist, which looked a little childish; she also held a gigantic swimming tube and an inflatable killer whale doll in her hands. Juxtaposing Chiaki with Senpai, whose figure rivaled that of a model, there was an incredibly clear..... urm, contrast between the two of them (in many different aspects). Moreover, I could see the drum set, the huge Marshall amplifiers and the rest of the gear behind them—the whole scene just seemed surreal.

"Hey, snap out of your daze! Don't you have anything to say about this?"

"Well..... how about you girls wear this on stage during our actual performance?"

"Senpai, did you hear what he said?"

"Mmm, we can consider it." Don't take it seriously!

Chiaki turned her head around to look at Mafuyu, who was sitting on the sofa tuning her guitar. "Mafuyu, hurry up and change too." Mafuyu shook her head.

"Let's practice instead."

Mafuyu had become a practicing fanatic after our session yesterday. She was the same today as well—she had refused to let go of her guitar ever since we finished our breakfast. She seemed to be in a bad mood, as usual, but I think it was because she couldn't practice even though she really wanted to. There was nothing bad about that though.

"Moreover, I can't swim."

"But you bought a swimsuit!"

Chiaki stepped up her attack against the cowering Mafuyu.

"Geez, Mafuyu is never united with the band!"

Mafuyu seemed shocked. She looked at Chiaki, Senpai and me.

There's no need for you to put it so harshly—Mafuyu suddenly stood up as I thought that.

"..... I understand. I'll come back after changing."

She then made her way up the stairs and into her room.

"Nao, you go change too."

Chiaki kicked me in the back.

"Eh? Me too?" I don't particularly enjoy swimming.

"But of course! Why else do you think we came to the beach?"

Senpai followed up with, "You're a guy anyway, so it's fine if you just join us in your underwear."

"N-No way! I get it, you guys head over there first. I'll bring the onigiri when I'm done changing."



It's really easy for guys to change into their swimsuits, and we don't have to apply that troublesome stuff on our skin either.

Because of that, I had finished kneading the onigiri and wrapping the omelets in aluminum foil before Mafuyu even left her room. She probably needs more time to change because of her right hand? A girl was changing on the second floor while I was preparing the food—somehow, the whole situation felt a little strange.

It seemed awkward to wait for Mafuyu to finish changing, so I yelled towards the second floor. "I'll be going first!" I then put on a sweatshirt and made my way down to the beach.

Mafuyu arrived a while later. After seeing her violet-colored swimsuit beneath her hoodie, I finally understood the reason behind Chiaki's persistence. Their swimsuits were the same style; the only difference was the color.

"Nao, take a photo of us!"

Chiaki ran to Mafuyu excitedly.

"Young man, what should I do? I'm facing a problem here."

Senpai was lying next to me beneath the parasol. She said that to me with a sweet voice, after taking a look at Mafuyu, and then Chiaki.

"What's wrong?"

"The two of them are just too beautiful. What a headache."

How do you expect me to answer that!? Just sleep quietly!

We laid our mat down on a small sandy area between the boulders, and sat down to have lunch. Because the space was small, I could easily see Mafuyu's fair skin at a very close distance. And then there was Chiaki's tanned skin, as well as Senpai's—urm..... in any case, I was the only one eating lunch facing the cliffs. However, they had no intention of letting me off easily.

"Nao, I want to eat the dried plums, so help me peel them."

"Peel them yourself!"

"Young man, I've spilled tea on my swimsuit. Can you help me wipe it off?"

"Wipe it off yourself!"

"Naomi, help me wrap the seaweed."

"Wrap—" No wait, Mafuyu can't do that by herself, right? Since she only had one mobile hand. When I was preparing the onigiri, I packed the components similar to how the convenience stores did—with the seaweed separated from the rice. If I had thought of this earlier, I would've just wrapped the seaweed on the onigiri.

"Nao, you spoil Mafuyu too much! You have to let her do things like this herself."

Didn't you ask me to do everything as well!?

"And so I'll be eating this—" "You can't!"

Chiaki and Mafuyu pounced towards the wrapped onigiri in my hand at the same time, resulting in them crashing into me and crushing me below them. Hey! We're touching each other in a lot of places, and it hurts! As I struggled fiercely beneath Chiaki's tummy, Senpai took the onigiri from me and ate it.

"A peaceful resolution. Can I sit at the very top?"

"Please stop. I'll be squashed to death."

I crawled my way out from beneath Mafuyu's and Chiaki's bodies, and immediately distanced myself from all of them to catch my breath.

I don't remember Chiaki's chest being that well-developed, so when did they—no wait, what the heck am I thinking here!? Calm down. Deep breaths. I looked at them while squatting down and saw Chiaki and Mafuyu staring at each other. The view of both of them in their swimsuits reached my eyes once again, and for a long while, I couldn't make my way back to the mat.

We were all sweaty after lunch, so Chiaki pulled Mafuyu to the beach right after they had both finished eating. Putting an unwilling expression on her face, Mafuyu protested, "But I said I couldn't swim!"

"I told you it's okay! Just hold onto Torajirou!" Chiaki said, as she roughly patted the giant inflatable killer whale doll. So you even gave it a name huh.....

"B-But..... what if I fall off?"

"Nao and I will be there beside you. Isn't that right?" Eh, I have to follow along?

"Uh—....."

"Geez, are you trying to disrupt the unity of the band again?"

Mafuyu finally nodded her head, rather unwillingly. Seemed like we could get her to do whatever we wanted as long as we mentioned the unity of the band.

Chiaki had already pulled Mafuyu's hoodie away from her. Mafuyu grabbed tightly onto the killer whale Torajirou, but the moment the tip of her toes came into contact with the sea, a frightened expression appeared on her face.

Chiaki said exasperatingly, "It'll be even more dangerous if you continue to bend your legs like that. You'll fall off!"

"But I'll get wet....."

"We're at the sea, so of course we'll get wet!"

"Ah, w-wait!"

Chiaki pushed Torajirou into the sea without hesitation.

"Nao too. Quick."

I quickly went into the water and swam to the left of Torajirou to

help maintain its balance. I accidentally touched Mafuyu's thighs just once—I quickly retracted my hands in shock, and nearly drowned while doing so. Mafuyu's smooth legs and her incredibly slender waist were so close I could reach out and touch them. I dared not face her at all, so the only thing I could do was continue staring at the nose of the killer whale doll. I could feel my heart thumping in the cool waters of the sea.



Mafuyu shut her eyes as she hugged the killer whale doll tightly. She even trembled for quite a while before she finally stopped struggling and let down her legs. The sea was not shallow; even

though we were only a slight distance away from the beach, the water had already come up to my shoulders. Because I was only wearing a pair of beach slippers, I could occasionally feel the sharp edges of the rocks below.

"It's so cold....." Mafuyu mumbled.

"But it feels comfortable, right?"

Chiaki, who was on the other side of the killer whale doll, said.

Mafuyu opened her eyes timidly. Because Chiaki had been swimming forward nonstop, we were already a considerable distance away from the beach. From where we were, we could see the contours of the seawall, which was made up of multiple wave-dissipating blocks stacked together. A bunch of cumulonimbus clouds were gradually gathering right above it. The waves were constantly pushing us back to the shore, but we went against the current and swam further outwards.

In front of our eyes was a stretch of deep blue, and a stretch of sky blue above it. At the boundary of the two—at the horizon—white overflowed. It felt like my limbs had dissolved into the cool waters of the sea—the only thing that proved I existed there was my heartbeat.

"..... It's beautiful."

Those words slipped out from between Mafuyu's lips. Ever since we hit the waters, Mafuyu had been grabbing my right arm tightly. I could feel the trembling of her hand gradually dying down.

I lifted myself up onto the left fin of the killer whale doll and scanned the surface of the sea.

The sea that stretched endlessly outwards was the same color as Mafuyu's eyes.

How I wish time would just stop like this.

If the skies forever continue to be as clear as they are now, Mafuyu and I could probably swim anywhere we wanted.

However, my slowly drifting thoughts were pulled back to reality by Chiaki's voice.

"And next, we have to get Mafuyu used to coming into contact with

the water."

"Eh? Kya—"

The inflated doll shook violently, and a splash of cold water flew into my ears. I quickly grabbed hold of Mafuyu's arms to support her.

"S-Stop!"

"It's fine, it's just seawater!"

Chiaki began splashing the water onto Mafuyu's body. From the sound of Chiaki's voice, she seemed to be really happy. Mafuyu kept moving about in an attempt to avoid the attacks from Chiaki, which forced me to waste a lot of effort maintaining the balance of the killer whale doll. Though this time around, Mafuyu did retaliate against Chiaki.

After having her fun bullying Mafuyu, Chiaki said, from the other side of the killer whale doll,

"It's about time for us to head back?"

"I want to go back as soon as possible." Mafuyu's voice sounded like it was close to tears.

"Nao and I will be swimming back first. Do your best with Torajirou!"

"Y-You can't!"

With her face turning pale, Mafuyu grabbed me tightly by my arm, so much that her fingernails dug into the back of my hand.



Even after we had our fun at the beach, the summer sun was still shining high above the skies. When we were all done showering, Senpai instructed us to "take a little rest" before she locked herself up in her room. I saw her take her guitar with her, so she's probably trying to come up with a new song?

The food stocks were about to be depleted, so I decided to go out to do some shopping.

As I was walking back to the villa, carrying the plastic bags in my

hands, I heard the sound of a piano coming from inside.

Piano?

After walking past the forest, I could see inside the hall through the balcony. Sitting on the piano seat was a person with long maroon-colored hair, swaying herself slowly to the gentle tempo of the accompaniment.

Perhaps it was because she had heard the sound of my footsteps—Mafuyu closed the lid of the keyboard and stood up. Her ears are as sharp as ever.

What song was she playing.....?

When I opened the door and entered the main hall, Mafuyu was shaking her head vigorously, despite me not having asked her anything.

"Y-You heard wrong. There was nothing at all."

I glanced around the hall. Chiaki was curled up, sleeping on the sofa. I guess she must've been dead tired after the morning jog, the practice and the swim. After seeing how bad her sleeping posture was (she was about to fall head first onto the floor), I pushed her back onto the sofa and covered her tummy with a blanket. Regardless of how hot summer is, you shouldn't sleep with your navel revealed.

"Senpai..... is she still upstairs?" I asked Mafuyu, while placing the stuff I had bought into the fridge.

"I haven't heard the sounds of a guitar, so she might be asleep."

I see, sounds like a good time for a quick nap. Ah, no wait—this may be my only chance to speak alone with Mafuyu, as Chiaki had barged into Mafuyu's room and disrupted us yesterday.

When I walked back into the hall from the kitchen, Mafuyu was already out on the balcony. She was playing the tune she had played earlier on the piano with her Stratocaster guitar, though it wasn't connected to the amplifiers. I grabbed my bass and walked past the glass door to join her.

"This is Senpai's composition, right?"

Mafuyu nodded.

"This is the first time the band has tried to write a song about love, so we probably don't have much of an idea of how to go about it. How should we compose the song?"

"I don't know why, but somehow, it feels like all the songs Kyouko has written are not compatible with her own voice at all."

I looked at Mafuyu's face in surprise.

"..... What?" Mafuyu tilted her head with a confused expression on her face.

When did she start..... addressing Senpai directly by her name? And that means..... no, I don't think that's the case.

"You were talking about them being incompatible..... What does that mean?"

"I think....."

Mafuyu looked in the direction of the second floor as she spoke.

"Whenever Kyouko composes songs, she seems to compose them with a male singer in mind."

"That's....."

Upon hearing Mafuyu say that, I realized it might actually be true. Senpai deliberately lowered her vocal range whenever she sang—but I didn't pay any particular attention to it, as I thought that was just how she sang.

"And so..... if the song is slow, she can no longer conceal it with her voice."

I gave an "Oh—" and couldn't help but stare at Mafuyu's face for a long time. Thinking about it a little deeper, this girl had been growing up in the world of music since she was born—perhaps that's why she notices these minute details so quickly?

However, Mafuyu didn't go on any further than that. It was my turn to take over. In order to prevent the quiet song from being destroyed, I'd have to support Senpai's voice. But how should I go about doing it?

I couldn't come up with any ideas, despite hugging onto my bass for a while. I was suddenly thrown into an illusion, where dust piled endlessly on my shoulders, and thus, prevented me from moving.

"But I think the piano will make things even worse."

I raised my head hesitantly when I heard Mafuyu say that.

"..... You heard..... the song in the morning?"

"Were you the one playing the song this morning?"

"Nope, that was Senpai."

"I see."

Mafuyu placed her immobile right hand on the table. Despite being someone who wore her heart on her sleeve, I couldn't read the expression on Mafuyu's face at that moment.

"Mafuyu, don't you..... hate it?"

I tried asking her. Mafuyu turned her head to face me.

"Hate what?"

"The piano. You were playing it just now, right?"

"I have already decided not to think about those things anymore."

Which meant she had been thinking about such things till not too long ago. I mean, she hadn't even chosen music as her elective.

"Moreover, all over the world, there is evidence of me playing the piano. There is no point in shutting my ears and ignoring it."

"That's quite a unique way of looking at things....."

"Because Papa always plays my CDs when he is at home. I would not be able to hold on if I didn't think that way."

Ebichiri..... that's just too much! That's why your daughter hates you!

"If so, then....." I chose my words carefully. "If your fingers could move again—"

I paused halfway into my question to take a quick peek at Mafuyu's face. She wasn't angry. Probably.

"—Would you play it again?"

"Did Papa request you to ask me that?"

"Ugh!" I made a weird sound on accident. Shit, I've been found out!

"Papa said he went to your house, and he said you were much

more decent than he had originally thought."

So Ebichiri's the one who told her that! But then..... there was nothing wrong with that either. I mean, he must've told her why he suddenly allowed her to join the training camp. Urm, what to do? There's no point in hiding it with the way things have developed, right?

"Mmm, something like that. But that's not all there is to it....."

I, too, wished to hear Mafuyu play the piano again. I had said it before, but Mafuyu didn't give me a response back then. What should I say for now?

"Do you want to hear me play the piano again?"

Mafuyu actually took the initiative and asked me that question, which surprised me a lot. I was stunned speechless for a moment, then finally answered with a silent nod.

"But..... you've already listened to all my CDs, right?"

"That's not the point, is it? They didn't record the pieces I like."

"For example?"

"Things like Beethoven's <Les Adieux> sonata. You said in an interview before, that you liked that piece, right? I want to listen to the complete recording in full clarity! The sound quality of the tape you sent me was no good at all. And there's also <Waldstein>—even though I don't like it that much, it'd just feel like something was missing if you didn't record that on a CD. As for <Appassionata>, you'd have to play that properly too! Felix Mendelssohn..... you'd have to at least record the whole of his <Lieder ohne Worte> series. Additionally, aside from all that, I hope you'd also consider recording some fugues for the piano—Urm, wait..... that's not the point!"

Without me realizing, I had rattled on and on about my own feelings, and was even laughed at by Mafuyu. Geez, I can't go on any further if you do that. I shut my mouth unhappily, and allowed my gaze to fall on my bass.

"..... But, I am not in the band to play the piano, right? Because I am a guitarist here."

Mafuyu murmured.

"Eh? Ah, no....."

"So let's not talk about that for now. Because I am not really sure about it myself."

Somehow, it felt like Mafuyu had misunderstood something. If, in the future, we composed a song that required the accompaniment of a piano, and if Mafuyu's fingers were completely healed by then, wouldn't it be natural for me to want Mafuyu to play the piano for that? No wait, you can't really put it like that.....

The problem doesn't lie in whether she's a guitarist or a pianist—

I tried asking her again, "Well..... have you solved your problems with regards to the band?"

"Eh?"

"You should understand..... your reason for joining the band, right?"

That was the promise between Mafuyu and me. However, she shook her head.

"Haven't you figured it out yet? We were that....."

"It's you.....!" Mafuyu suddenly interrupted my words loudly. "It's because you do not understand!"

I was stunned.

"You said..... I don't understand?"

"You do not understand me."

Mafuyu stared at me with tears in her eyes. Of course, I never understood her that well, and now was no exception. "But..... that has nothing to do with what we're discussing, right?"

Mafuyu suddenly turned her head away to face the forest; so I could only swallow half that question back in my mouth.

"Then what is *your* reason for joining the band?"

"..... Why huh? It's because Chiaki and Senpai invited me to join."

"I don't mean it that way."

If you don't mean it that way, then what other reason is there for

me to join the band? To play the bass? To pump the blood into the hands and legs? Is that really all there is to it? Why does it have to be Mafuyu? Why does it have to be me? There should be a deeper reason to that—

That's right. I shouldn't be here just for the sake of playing a musical instrument. If there was a reason I had to be in the band, despite the huge difference in skill compared to the other members, then it'd be because I could see the things Senpai couldn't see from her perspective. The things she couldn't realize if she didn't feel it with her heart—the sounds she couldn't imagine if she didn't hold the bass in her hands.

"..... Ah!"

Just then, a song suddenly appeared in my mind.

I could almost hear the final product produced after weaving our music in with Senpai's singing voice. I picked up my bass once again. Because of that sudden strike of inspiration, I left my words hanging halfway.

At that moment, I had planned to say something important—something really important—to Mafuyu. I should've said it back then. If I had, maybe we wouldn't have passed each other by.

However, the me back then was already engulfed by music. I tried replaying the sounds in my head, strumming the strings with my fingers. Can I materialize it? I wouldn't know without recording it and listening to it. We had a recorder around, but Senpai and Chiaki were sleeping. Moreover, it'd be really embarrassing if I failed, so I preferred to try it out alone.

"What's going on?"

Mafuyu asked me suddenly. She probably found it strange that I was in a sudden fluster.

"Mmm..... I want to try something. If possible, I hope to do some recording by myself, but I don't want to disturb the two of them."

Mafuyu looked at me with a pair of moist eyes. Back then, I really should've noticed the slight feelings of blame and dependence towards me in the expression of her eyes. Mafuyu stood up from her chair and pushed the glass door open. I heard her walk up and down

the stairs, and before I knew it, she had returned to the balcony.

"Use this."

Mafuyu took out a recorder from a torn and tattered synthetic black leather box. That was the precious item Mafuyu's mother had left for her—and that I had helped repair.

"..... Can I really borrow this from you?"

"The recordings may not be crystal clear, but it has a large recording range."

Since it would just be a trial recording, it should be more than enough. The recorder still wasn't spoilt yet. Seemed like Mafuyu had been using it really carefully, which made me a little happy.

I placed the bass back in its case, and stuffed the mini-amplifiers and the recorder into the pockets, then crossed over the balcony fence.

"Where are you going?" Mafuyu sounded like she was close to tears.

"Eh? Urm..... to a place where I won't disturb anyone, even if I sing."

"T-Then I too shall—"

Urm, you can't. What would happen if the trial ended up a failure? It'd be really embarrassing!

"Since both of them are still asleep, you should just stay here instead."

Mafuyu became visibly depressed, but I really had no idea why. I walked away from the villa, past the cries of the cicadas, and made my way towards the beach.



I returned to the villa when the sun was about to set. The door opened just as I was about to reach for the doorknob. Chiaki stuck her head out and said, with an expression as though she was about to pounce on me,

"Nao, you're back? Geez, where did you go? I'm hungry!"

Chiaki energetically pulled me into the villa. I saw Mafuyu sitting down wearily on the sofa, hugging her guitar.

"Is Senpai still holed up in her room?"

"Mmm, so the two of us could only practice by ourselves. Hey, Mafuyu, let's start!"

Chiaki returned to the drum set and gently twirled her drumsticks. Mafuyu seemed dead tired from all the playing—she wobbled as she tried to stand up, but instead, weakly sat back down on the sofa. Go take a rest if you're that tired.

As I entered the kitchen to prepare to stew some vegetables, Chiaki began to play the drums by herself. I heard a set of semiquavers on the hi-hat; it sounded just like the buzzing of a mosquito. I already knew what the song was just from that short section alone. Mafuyu should've realized in an instant, right? Shortly after the beats came the guitar solo, which sounded like someone running barefoot down a mountain of spikes.

It was <He Man Woman Hater>. A chill ran through my spine, causing goosebumps to appear on my skin.

What a miracle that was—all Chiaki needed to convey her thoughts to Mafuyu, was four bars of drumming. That power formed the foundation of this band's jam sessions.

Mafuyu and Chiaki's performance went on endlessly like a kaleidoscope. It suddenly felt like they had added in the overture of <The Marriage of Figaro>; and as the melody spiraled its way up to the peak, Chiaki brought in <Paradise City> by Guns N' Roses.

I gently touched Mafuyu's recorder, which had been placed on the fridge.

Mafuyu was alright already. I'm the one who should be worried about my reason for being in the band. I probably won't be able to do much during the performance, right? If so, I'll just have to do the things I can do.

I recorded it multiple times, and listened to it many times as well. I didn't really know if it would be successful though. I really wasn't too confident of myself.



After dinner, Chiaki said she wanted to play with the fireworks. She had even prepared fireworks that fired off from the ground—that girl was really meticulous only when it came to things like this.

"Don't put those fireworks on your hand."

Chiaki immediately retorted,

"But it's more interesting this way!"

"You caused a small fire when you played with them like that way back in elementary school!"

We're loaning this villa from someone, so what would we do if something happened?

Mafuyu was almost shocked to tears by the spinning firecrackers, whereas Chiaki was bundling the sparklers together to make an unbelievably thick bunch. When we were done with all the fireworks, it was already late into the night.

It was decided, yet again, that I'd be the last to shower. And after I finished washing our clothes, I was to make my way back to where we played with the fireworks to clean up the rubbish. The thick smell of gunpowder lingered in the air in front of the balcony. The smell was only present during the summer nights, but I quite liked that smell sometimes.

In the end, I didn't have a chance to show Senpai my recording, even though the recorder was in my pocket the whole time. Damn, it's all Chiaki's fault!

I was scanning through the bushes, seeing if there were any remains of the fireworks left, when I suddenly heard the sound of the glass door opening.

"I'm really sorry for making you do everything, young man."

Seems like Senpai just finished showering. She was wearing a tank top and a pair of shorts. While drying her hair with a towel, she sat herself down on the fence of the balcony.

"Is the bathroom empty?"

"Not yet. Comrade Ebisawa's still in there. She'll probably come

over to inform you when she's done with her bath."

After I finished splashing water around the surroundings, I made my way back to the balcony, with the pails in my hands; I then sat on a chair some distance away from Senpai. What's with her wet hair sticking to the areas of her exposed chest!? I dared not look at her at all. However, Senpai took the initiative and got close to me. When she sat down right next to me, I suddenly became nervous.

"Somehow, it feels like young man's the one looking after us during this training camp."

Senpai hung the towel around her shoulders and showed a lazy smile. That didn't sound like something she would usually say, which made me uncertain of how to respond.

"..... Don't take it to heart. I'm used to doing all these things already."

Ah, right. I couldn't just head to sleep like this. I lifted my body slightly and took the recorder out of my pocket.

"Well..... I tried to record something while I was out."

"Hmm?"

"It's the song composed by Senpai. Though it's only me singing along to the accompaniment of the bass."

Senpai stared at me as though I were some brightly shining object, then pressed the play button on the recorder. I could hear the sound of the tape rolling, as well as the rhythmic background noise. And then—

The sounds of the waves. And over them, were the soft and elegant chords of the bass.

A simple harmonic progression played using the shuffle rhythm.

Next, was the stuttering sound of my hoarse voice.

"..... I can't really sing, so I might not have been able to convey the feelings in it. This is the opening of Mr. Big's **<Green-Tinted Sixties Mind>**. The song would be ruined if the acoustics were too heavy, so I decided to use only the bass to play the chords—"

Senpai pressed her finger lightly on my lips, causing me to swallow back the words I were about to say. She grasped the recorder with

her other hand, as though she were trying to listen to my singing through her sense of touch as well.

When the main chorus ended, Senpai stood up all of a sudden and pulled me past the glass door. I couldn't help but cover my face with my hands. As expected, I was meddling too much..... Even someone as incredible as Senpai had racked her brain trying to come up with an arrangement for the song, without success. How could someone like me be able to come up with—

"Young man, mind helping me rewind the tape?"

I responded by making a noise. When I lifted my head, Senpai was already standing before me with her Les Paul electric guitar in her hands.

"Eh?"

"I want to listen to it all over again, from the beginning."

I was stunned for a while, and just stared at Senpai's eyes—her eyes burned with passion. I then quickly pressed the rewind button, rewinding the tape all the way to the beginning, and played it again.

Senpai added a few simple phrases in-between my singing voice and the bass. Rather than calling them arpeggios, they were more like the whispers produced by the sand, when it's washed about by the waves. Senpai's guitar had connected the blank stutters of the bass in a natural way, and thus, etched out a smooth line of melody.

When the song ended, we remained silent for a long while. The only thing I could hear was the tape rolling on—and that too, was disrupted, by the sound of the button springing up as the tape reached its end. When the recorder quieted down, all that was left were the sounds of the waves and the insects, as well as the occasional roar of the faraway car.

"You should be the one to sing this song."

Senpai said softly.

"..... Eh? But....."

"So that's the nature of the song huh..... but why didn't I realize it? Even though I had written the song."

Senpai leaned the guitar against the table. After rubbing her eyes

with her fingers, she looked at me. Perhaps it was because of the backlight, but her eyes seemed slightly wet.

"Urm..... Senpai? Are you angry because I rearranged the song and lowered its pitch—?"

"What are you talking about? I'm not angry! Ah, geez, can you stop talking to me with the voice you use when you sing? Just stay quiet for a while, or I won't be able to control my urge to hug you tightly!"

I immediately quieted down. I could feel my throat burning up in an instant.

"In any case, this song belongs to you. You will be the one to sing this at our actual performance, alright?"

Senpai's gaze remained fixed on my body. I could only nod my head slightly.

I let out a soft sigh. Senpai finally broke her sight away from me, thus returning me my freedom.

"Why didn't I notice it sooner? It wouldn't do if we used my voice. No wait, perhaps I had already noticed it a long time ago.....?"

I suddenly recalled what Mafuyu had said—

That..... which means..... is it really that?

"..... Mafuyu, she....."

"Hmm?" Senpai turned to face me. Her eyes were slightly red.

Should I ask or not? That thought suddenly appeared in my head. However, for some unknown reason, I couldn't stop myself from asking.

"Mafuyu said something like that before. That each and every song you compose, is designed for a male vocal. Is that really true?"

With that, I lifted my head to look at Senpai. This time around, there was an obvious gloominess about her face, just like the dark sky prior to the incoming downpour. Senpai then used a slight smile to force that gloomy expression away, and said, in a murmuring voice,

"She's a really sharp girl."

Senpai smiled lightly, and raised her head to look at the sea of

stars scattered across the night sky.

"There used to be this person in the third band I was in. I thought he was my Paul McCartney, but—I was wrong."

I forgot when it was exactly, but Senpai had said something like this before—John Lennon had Paul McCartney, someone he could call his "other half." Similarly, Senpai was looking for her own Paul.

There used to be someone who stood next to Senpai—a guy. Which means that, even now, Senpai's songs are still bound by his voice?

"In any case, that person's no longer around. Everyone will eventually leave me, and move away from my side."

Senpai gripped her exposed shoulders as she whispered that out loud. I trembled from the strange chill I felt. From the side, Senpai's face seemed like it was shrouded by a patch of dark clouds.

Everyone will eventually leave. The bands Senpai used to be in had all disappeared as well. Senpai used to say these things half-jokingly with a carefree expression on her face, as though she didn't care a single bit about them.

But, if she really didn't care—

She wouldn't be wearing that expression on her face right now, right?

"..... It'll be fine."

Upon hearing me say that, Senpai turned her face slowly towards me. Her eyes were like melting glass.

"It'll be alright this time around. We won't disappear. I mean, this is the band Senpai started herself!"

"That's true, but..... things are going too smoothly, and that makes me afraid. The thought of my fellow members leaving me, one by one—the thought being left alone yet again. I become uneasy whenever I think about things like that. It should be fine if I just don't think about them, but I know very well—I know that people can easily, very easily, just suddenly disappear someday and never return. It has happened again and again, so....."

"Sen..... pai.....?"

Kagurazaka-senpai quietly placed her hands on the silent recorder on the table. Her hands were trembling slightly.

"So I've decided to keep moving forward. Be it the training camp or the live performance, I'll decide everything myself. I have to act one step ahead of everything..... to not suddenly wake up from this beautiful dream."

I could no longer say anything.

People can easily just suddenly disappear one day—that was something even I knew. Someone close to me had disappeared when I was only six, leaving me, and the man who used to be my father, behind. The man who shared the same uneasiness as me.

But even if I knew, I couldn't come up with anything to say to Senpai. If that overwhelming confidence of hers that pulled us all forward, was nothing more than an act—a facade—then the actual source of power helping us accomplish everything was just incredibly depressing.

"How strange....." The smile that appeared on Senpai's face was like the pale white sky signaling the arrival of dawn. "I actually said everything out loud. Perhaps it's because I feel at ease. Perhaps this time, it really will be okay."

"..... It'll be fine."

I could only repeat that line.

"Mmm, that's right. I think I've already found the Paul McCartney that belongs only to me."

The person standing next to Senpai.....

"..... You mean..... Mafuyu?"

Senpai stared intently at my mouth. A strange expression briefly appeared on her face—half laughing, half crying.

Shortly after, it transformed into a dumbfounded expression.

"Comrade Aihara does always say you're an idiot and a dense person....."

Damn it, she's actually talking behind my back..... Urm, no wait, did I..... just say something incredibly stupid?

"You're really an inconceivable guy! Should I call you sharp or dense? You're not just pretending you don't know, right?"

"Urm, sorry, you mean—"

"Paul McCartney's a bassist, right?"

"..... Ah....."

Senpai's words continued to echo in my head. For a moment, I couldn't understand the meaning behind those words. It wasn't until I felt the warmth of Senpai's hands on mine, that I finally understood.



"Urm, well..... B-But....."

"But—what?"

Senpai moved her face closer. Her smile was returning back to her normal, confident one. As for me, I looked incredibly embarrassed—as though my strength had been totally sapped away from me.

"B-But I'm not good with my bass....."

"Mmm, I know that. You'll have to practice harder in order to become my pillar."

"I can't compose as well as Senpai does....."

"For someone who snatched my melody from me and thoroughly converted it into something of his own, you sure know how to talk."

"Ugh..... B-But....."

Why am I forced into such a predicament? I was getting more and more confused.

"But I should be the secretary or something right? I can boast about things if I want to, but all I've really contributed to is getting Mafuyu in the band. After that....."

"Didn't I tell you before? I had my attention on you from the very beginning."

You did say that.....

Senpai increased her grip on my tightly clenched fists.

"I found you among the hundreds of articles your father had written, you know? If that isn't something special, then the rest of the encounters in this world are nothing more than just small accidents."

Senpai continued talking while staring at me from the side. My heart was beating faster and faster.

"It may have just been an excuse when I asked you to invite Ebisawa Mafuyu to the band. In actual fact, I had ways of accomplishing that even if I had to do it myself. However, I wanted to let you do it. You do understand what I'm saying, right?"

Of course I do. What if she wasn't using me to get Mafuyu into the Folk Music Research Club, but the other way around.....? No wait, but..... is this person being serious? Her face was close enough to nearly touch the tip of my nose, and her expression had returned to that of a schemer, who played around with me in her hands. Perhaps the tears she had shown me earlier were all just an act!

With my mind in chaos, I could no longer pry my eyes away from Senpai's lips.

"Are you..... serious?"

I finally squeezed those words out of my mouth.

"I am serious all the time."

Senpai moaned sweetly.

Just then, I heard a *pa* sound coming from behind Senpai.

I quickly moved myself away from Senpai, and in the process, nearly fell off my chair. I stood up, using the table for support. It was all because I had seen the white silhouette of someone behind the glass door. That person had given up on trying to shut the door that was left ajar. With her hair swaying close to her body, she made her way back to the hall.

It was Mafuyu.

I brushed aside the chair and swiftly made my way across the balcony, squeezing into the hall through the slit in the glass door. Why am I so anxious? I had no idea at all.

"Mafuyu?"

When I shouted that, the person in her pajamas—with her back facing me—stopped on the spiraling staircase.

"..... The bathroom's empty. Go take your shower."

Her voice sounded really stiff, and she didn't even spare me a glance. Why? Did she happen to hear the conversation between Senpai and me? How much did she hear?

"Urm..... Mafuyu—"

My tongue was twisted up in my mouth. Is it alright for me to stop her? I didn't know. All I knew was that a bone-chilling air was blowing straight at my face. Is she angry? Why is she angry?

"So I am just an excuse."

"..... Eh?"

"Nothing."

Mafuyu then ran up the stairs, rushed straight into her room, and

slammed the door shut. The echoes rang throughout the ceiling of the hall.

I could only stand at the side of the drum set and stare blankly at the silent door that had swallowed Mafuyu.

The door of the room next to Mafuyu's opened slightly, revealing Chiaki's sleepy face.

"What's happening? Is something wrong?"

I shook my head. Since I couldn't bring myself to look straight at Chiaki, I could only fix my gaze on the door of Mafuyu's room.

The sound of footsteps, as well as the scraping of the closing door, could be heard behind me. But I remained rooted in place, and couldn't turn my head around at all.

Chapter 7 - The Place Where She Shuts Herself In

It was almost ten the following day, and Mafuyu was still in her bedroom.

"It seems like she's already awake. I just heard the sounds of her changing."

Senpai said that in a depressed manner. Hey, there's another room between yours and hers! There has to be a limit to how sharp your ears can be!

"Even if it's at the other end of the school building, I can still hear the sounds of girls changing!"

"Geez! Is that what you do when you skip lessons?"

Upon hearing Chiaki say that in an angry tone, Senpai looked downwards miserably.

"But..... it's always at the most crucial times that I miss hearing things. Just like then. If only I had noticed Comrade Mafuyu was done with her shower....."

Back then? I don't think Senpai was in the state to be worrying about anything else back then.

Moreover, I was the one facing the hall, and I didn't even notice Mafuyu was there till I heard the sound of the glass door. It felt like I had done something shameful—but I didn't do anything wrong that should've made Mafuyu angry! I didn't, right?

"Why is Mafuyu so angry?"

Chiaki stared at Senpai and me as she tuned the tightness of the snare drum.

"It'd be much easier to deal with if she was just angry. That was probably..... her not being angry."

Senpai tilted her head slightly, then let out a sigh. Somehow, she didn't seem to be that worried. It was like I was the only one worried

sick, and that made me feel really uneasy.

After we finished breakfast, I decided to head to the second floor to check things out. I knocked on the door of Mafuyu's room. No response.

"..... Mafuyu? I brought breakfast over."

I could feel that she was on the other side of the door; she just wasn't responding.

Back then, Mafuyu said—

"So I am just an excuse."

Which meant she had at least heard the last few sentences Senpai said, and thought she was just an excuse for Senpai to pull me into the band—no wait, that's not it.

"Mafuyu, please open the door! Let's have a proper talk!"

If things continue this way, Mafuyu might start thinking in the wrong direction.

The door to her room remained tightly shut, so I gave up and carried the tray of onigiri back downstairs.

"Is Mafuyu okay?" Chiaki asked. I shook my head.

"There's nothing we can do. Let's practice." When Senpai said that, she had already plugged her Les Paul guitar into the amplifiers and was ready to go.

Somehow..... it feels like this person isn't concerned about Mafuyu at all. Am I thinking too much into it?

"Is Senpai not worried about Mafuyu?"

Chiaki knitted her eyebrows.

"Of course I am, to the point that it feels like my body's about to be ripped apart. However..... I know there's nothing much I can do."

"Geez!"

This time, it was Chiaki who ran up the stairs.

"Mafuyu, did something happen? Did that stupid Nao say something terrible again?"

Chiaki's voice traveled down to the first floor. She said that using

the same mocking tone she always used when she wanted to tease me. But this time around, it felt really uncomfortable—as though something were stuck in-between my ribs.

In the end, Chiaki walked back down dejectedly.

"She didn't even say anything."

Chiaki sat down in the chair of the drum set, and sighed in the direction of the hi-hat pedal.

"The training camp ends today....."

"We still have some time left before Hiroshi comes over to fetch us."

With that, Senpai gently plucked one of the strings of her Les Paul guitar. I might've just been thinking too much, but that sentence of hers sounded really cold.

"..... Which song are we going to practice? A song by The Eagles again? Since Mafuyu's not around."

"Nope. We'll be practicing the new song."

Senpai took a quick look at me. The song..... yesterday?

Chiaki and Senpai discussed how they should go about having the drums come in, but I was in no mood to play the bass at all. This is the first time we'd be practicing this song as a band, and if we carry on and work on the song without Mafuyu—

Mafuyu's reason for being here might really just disappear.

I covered my mouth after something had come to my mind all of a sudden.

Is that the reason..... behind Mafuyu's uneasy feelings? She had kept talking about how she didn't know her reason for being here. If that was really the case.....

"Young man?"

"..... Y-Yes?"

I raised my head in response to Senpai's call.

"We'll go with the full ensemble for the intro of the song, and play the first four bars grandly, with a *bam*. We'll be using the same chords for section B as well. Well, something like that."

Senpai strummed her guitar gently to demonstrate it for me.

"The sound of the cymbals will then die down, and we'll transition into the intro you recorded on the tape yesterday. During the first repeat, the guitar won't be coming in. Okay?"

I nodded my head stiffly.

How will Mafuyu feel when she listens to this song?



For a long time, we couldn't agree on the composition of the song. After a while, Chiaki suddenly suggested "Why don't we remove the drums?" I couldn't understand the reason behind her suggestion—it would be too bland with just Senpai's guitar playing in the background. But since we couldn't make it work with the three of us playing at the same time—

Senpai suddenly lifted both her hands up to stop us from playing. We had already played the opening intro a countless number of times. Chiaki's drumsticks slid down the surface of the cymbals, producing an uncomfortable scratching sound that filled the entire hall.

"..... What's wrong?"

"Comrade Ebisawa has gone out."

"Eh?"

I lifted my head to look at the corridor of the second floor. She went out? If that were the case, we should've noticed her door opening.

"She went out through the windows. That reckless girl." Senpai quickly turned down the volume of the amplifiers and switched them off. She then threw her guitar on the sofa and dashed out the door.

Out through the windows? There were trees close to the windows on the other side of the room, so it wasn't impossible for her to climb down using the tree trunks. But..... really? Chiaki was one step faster than me at making her way to the stairs. Both of us ran up to the second floor, causing the spiral staircase to creak. Chiaki opened Mafuyu's bedroom door, but there was no one to be seen;

there was only an opened briefcase on the bed. Through the opened window, we could see the layers of greenery swaying with the wind.

Chiaki leaned her back against the side of the door dejectedly, then slumped onto the floor.

"Why is she doing such dangerous things despite her fingers being immobile....."

I could feel my strength leaving me. I sat on the handrails of the corridor weakly, and stretched my legs out.

Just where is Mafuyu planning to go to? She even ran out barefooted. Damn.....

Is she going to disappear again without saying anything?

"Thank god Senpai realized."

Chiaki mumbled as she looked towards the opened window.

That person must've been worrying about Mafuyu in her own way—that's probably why we only practiced the new song, right? Because the tone of that song was quiet, which made it easier for her to detect any movements on the second floor.

Thank god she noticed it. But I didn't notice anything.

"What exactly happened? Are you not telling me something?"

It was only after I had heard Chiaki's words that I lifted my head up from between my knees.

Chiaki bit her lower lip and stared at me earnestly.

"..... Actually..... I don't really know either."

"Why is Nao always like this!?"

"Sorry."

But where exactly should I start? Somehow, it felt like, even if it was Chiaki, I shouldn't tell her about the gloomiest part of Senpai's heart.

"Mafuyu seems to think the band will be alright even if she's not around."

"Mmm, I know that."

"And then..... I think she overheard a conversation between

Senpai and I..... probably."

I explained to Chiaki what happened yesterday night. In order to not tell her about Senpai's painful past, I paid special attention to the words I used.

"Which means, Senpai used Mafuyu to get close to Nao?"

"No, like I already said, that's not it."

Mafuyu probably thought the same thing Chiaki did.

"Senpai was already planning to invite Mafuyu; she just did so through me, even though she could've done it herself."

Well, if you want to say it in a manner as blunt as Chiaki's, it would be: Senpai used me to get Mafuyu in the band, and manipulated me to get myself in as well.

There was no need for Mafuyu to think too deeply into things. If only I had the chance to talk to her properly about it.

"I think Mafuyu probably knows that as well."

"..... Huh?"

"So it's pointless to explain everything to her, because that's not what's important."

I glanced at Chiaki's side profile. Behind her face were the leaves and branches of the trees, rustling gently in the wake of the breeze. The gaps between the leaves had sliced the sun's rays into multiple strands.

"The reason Mafuyu's in the band is because of Nao! Do you understand?"

I nodded my head hesitantly. Well, I had heard something similar from Mafuyu before; she said she was following me because Senpai had invited me to join the band. However, Chiaki shook her head with a slightly sad expression on her face.

"Mmm..... Nao probably doesn't get it."

"..... Don't get what?"

"Think through it carefully and figure it out yourself! I'd be very troubled if you didn't realize it yourself."

Just as I was about to continue asking her about it, I heard the

sound of knocking coming from the main door. Someone was knocking on the door. I sprang up and ran down the stairs.

Upon opening the door, I saw Senpai's exhausted face. Mafuyu was on her shoulders, her face green with exhaustion, and her eyes shut tight.

"What happened?"

Senpai dragged herself through the door carrying Mafuyu on her back.

"She collapsed on the floor, probably due to anemia. Comrade Aihara, clear out the space on the sofa."

Chiaki hastily removed the guitar. Senpai laid Mafuyu's small body horizontally on the sofa, then propped Mafuyu's legs up using the cushions, elevating her feet above her head. Finally, she began loosening Mafuyu's collar.

"Young man, there should be some red tea in the fridge, right? Add some sugar to it, then warm it up using the microwave. Bring it here when it's done."

"Ah, r-right."

As I grabbed the cup of red tea, making my way out of the kitchen, Mafuyu's eyes opened slightly—though she still looked to be in pretty bad shape. Senpai knelt down next to Mafuyu's face as Chiaki peeked at Mafuyu from behind the sofa.

"You were running about recklessly without having eaten breakfast, right?"

Senpai said gently, as she lightly touched Mafuyu's cheeks.

"Do you want to drink this? You'll feel better if you do."

Senpai took the cup from me. Mafuyu bit her lip and shook her head when the cup was held close to her face. Senpai slowly brought the cup to her mouth and took a sip of the red tea. She then got close to Mafuyu's lips—Hey! Hold it right there!

"..... Mmm, mmmmmm!"

With her hands being grabbed onto and her shoulders pressed down, Mafuyu had no choice but to accept Senpai's way of feeding her through her lips; she was even making noises through her

nose..... Uwa! I knew in my heart it was something I should not have been watching, but I continued to stare at Mafuyu till she finished swallowing the red tea.

"..... Fuu."

Senpai moved her moist lips away from Mafuyu. She then licked them with an intoxicated expression on her face.

"Thank you for that!"

"What's with the 'thank you for that'!? What exactly is going through your head at a time like this!?"

I snapped at her without even thinking, while Chiaki covered her blushing face with her hands.

"I'm sorry. I finally had the chance presented to me!"

"Geez! Stupid Senpai!" Chiaki yelled.

Mafuyu's face was flushed red. She turned her body away and buried her face in the back of the sofa.

"It was an emergency..... so I had no choice but to do it."

T-This person here..... I really couldn't come up with anything else to yell at her.

"Don't mind it, Comrade Ebisawa. Just treat it as though you were bitten by a stray dog and forget about it."

"You aren't allowed to say that since you're the culprit behind this!"

"Hey, there might be a next time if she forgets about it!"

"Behave yourself!"

Senpai patted me on my head when she saw I was agitated. Is she joking about it to alleviate the tense atmosphere? Or is she serious about everything she just said? My head hurt just thinking about it.

Just then, Senpai's handphone, which was on the piano, rang.

"..... Yes? Hmm? Ah, mmm. Thanks, I get it..... Mmm, see you later."

Pa. After closing her phone, Senpai turned her head around to look at the hall.

"Hiroshi's about to arrive. He just passed the intersection."

Chiaki and I exchanged looks for a moment, then looked at Mafuyu.

"Let's pack up and clean the hall! Comrade Ebisawa, you rest for a while. Young man, go prepare our bento. Hiroshi probably hasn't had lunch yet as well. Seems like we don't have much time to spare, so we'll eat on the car instead."

Senpai placed her guitar into its case, then proceeded to pack the stands.

Chiaki's sight landed on Mafuyu's maroon-colored hair. After a while, Chiaki stood up, made her way to the drum set, and began packing the cymbals.

It's finally about to end? Under such circumstances?

I took another look at Mafuyu's back. Her frail, slender body remained motionless.

In the end, I was unable to talk to her about anything. Mafuyu and I were still unable to communicate with each other properly.

But then..... would everything be fine if we could communicate with each other through words? Chiaki said before: *"So it's pointless to explain everything to her, because that's not what's important."*

Which means, it's all because I didn't notice?



It was a little past noon when I heard the sounds of an engine outside the door.

"Hmm? Why is everyone not tanned?"

Hiroshi stuck his head out from the driver's seat of the SUV.

"We didn't come here just to swim; we came to practice."

Senpai answered while carrying the drums from the terrace. Mafuyu was still lying on the sofa, and Chiaki had gone to Mafuyu's room to bring down her luggage. I took their luggage, along with mine, and loaded it all into the SUV. Just as I was about to head back to grab the rest of the luggage, Hiroshi pulled me by my collar.

"I-Is there something you want?"

"Did you do something that you weren't supposed to do?"

He didn't seem like he was joking, which flustered me.

"Urm..... why are you asking that?"

"The mood feels really strange. Even Kyouko has become really meek."

He was really sharp..... as expected from someone who had (probably) known Senpai for a long time.

"We had a small quarrel."

"Well, that's to be expected, since you're the only guy around! From the beginning, I had thought this might not have been the greatest idea."

"Urm..... it's probably not what Hiroshi's thinking."

"Nothing like that happened? But it was three days and two nights?"

Hiroshi placed his hands on my shoulders and asked softly.

"Urm..... nothing." The things he was referring to were probably..... those things, right?

"That's even worse, right? That's not normal at all."

I was getting more and more confused about what he was trying to say.

As I was about to walk through the door of the villa, I nearly bumped into Mafuyu, who was carrying the floor tom. Did she just wake up? She still looked like she was in really bad shape.

"It's better for you to continue resting."

I was about to offer to help her with that, but she shook her head silently instead. It's really dangerous for you to be carrying such a large object, given your immobile fingers. Are you really okay with that?

After ensuring that all the doors and windows were locked, and checking that all power sources were switched off, I locked the main door and passed the keys to Hiroshi. It was already one. The weather felt cool though, as the sky was filled with clouds.

Mafuyu sat between Senpai and Chiaki in the backseat, while I grabbed the bento and sat in the co-driver's seat.

"Hiroshi, that villa was quite impressive."

Senpai said that to Hiroshi after the car passed through the forest and hit the road .

"I want to come here next year as well. The four of us together."

The four of us—coming here together next year. Those words struck a chord somewhere deep in my heart.

"I'm okay with lending you guys the villa again, but don't ask me to be your driver next time. I don't have that much free time—I have to rush down to the studio after dropping you guys off."

"You can just ask someone else to take over for you."

"How could I possibly do that!"

Hiroshi slammed the pedals hard, and a refreshing gust of wind blew in through the open windows. Through the trees, I could catch glimpses of the glittering horizon.

"I'm chauffeuring three high school girls, yeah? How could I ask someone else to do this? What would I do if something happened? Also, for nothing to happen despite being with three girls—that's just embarrassing."

Somehow, it felt like he was indirectly talking to me. Did he notice? Hiroshi shot a glance at me, and laughed with his shoulders shaking. Immediately after, he turned on the stereo, and the conversation ended just like that.

The cheap-sounding, but warm, timbre of the keyboard—as well as the crisp sound of the guitar—could be heard from the speakers. It was Mötley Crüe's [**<Home Sweet Home>**](#).

Hiroshi spun the steering wheel sharply. The trees to our left disappeared along the bend, and what appeared before our eyes was the sea, as though it were bidding its last goodbye.



It was about four when we reached home. Hiroshi had kindly offered to drive us each back to our respective homes. Senpai and

Mafuyu had been dropped off earlier, so Chiaki and I were the last ones left in the car.

"Ah, you can just drop both of us off here. We live close to each other," said Chiaki, as she took her luggage out of the boot.

"Sorry for making you drive us home."

"It was nothing! I have to go this way anyway, as I'm heading down to Tokyo." Hiroshi removed his sunglasses and flashed a wry smile. It must've been hard on him. I mean, he only lost a bet.

"Hamasaka, you'll be going to the live performance, right?"

Chiaki stuck her head into the car through the driver side window and asked.

"Live performance? We aren't performing together..... Ah, you mean the live performance for Melancholy Chameleon?"

"Yes! I already got my ticket. I was really surprised when I saw you the day before yesterday."

Chiaki is a fan of his? I haven't been too interested in listening to music lately, so I had no idea at all.

"I'll make sure you can see me from the stage. Oh, I'll throw a towel up on stage too, so make sure you catch that!"

"Mmm!"

"Well, I'll be in your care during the secret gig too! Ah, we'll meet each other again during the rehearsals, yeah?"

Hiroshi then shifted his sight from Chiaki to me.

"I'm really thankful towards you. Somehow, it feels like I can't lift my head in front of you."

"Forget about it!" Hiroshi hammered me on the shoulders a few times.

"To be able to see Kyouko sing right before my eyes—that's more than enough for me."

I stared at the SUV as it left, then suddenly thought of something—just what is the relationship between him and Kagurazaka-senpai? He seemed to know more about Senpai than all of us, so he probably met her when she was in one of her earlier bands or

something?

"Nao, I'll be heading back!"

Chiaki's voice came from behind me, so I turned around.

"Well, next Monday? See you in school then."

"Ah..... mmm."

Even though it was the summer holidays, the schools were open during work days, so we could still use the club room. The live performance will be here soon huh.

"You must reflect on a lot of things, alright?"

After saying that, Chiaki ran past a turn at the intersection, then disappeared.

Reflect..... seems like I have to do some reflecting huh? But I had no idea what I should've been reflecting on, so finding that out was probably first on my list.

When I opened the door, a stack of records came crashing down onto me like an avalanche, nearly blowing me out the door. I stepped on a case or something, and felt a sort of cracking feeling under the sole of my foot. I had no strength left in me though, so I crawled up the corridor as though I was swimming, and removed my shoes.

"I'm back....."

The clothes in the washing room had already piled up into a small hill, which looked as though it was some sort of mysterious object. I was only away from home for two days—how did things become like this? The kitchen must be even worse, so I better not look at that for now.

I was surprised, though, that there was no music to be heard. It turned out Tetsurou was taking a nap on the sofa in the living room. He's enjoying himself quite a bit, huh.



After my bath at night, I just sat on my bed and stared at my handphone. For a long time, I fretted over what I should do.

I already had Mafuyu's number saved, so I could call her anytime I

wanted to.

If so, should I give her a call right now?

There were a lot of things I wanted to talk to her about—things like, if she had recovered from her anemia yet, and other stuff. I hadn't told her about the new song yet, and—

Before I knew it, I had already pressed the call button.

I placed the speaker next to my ears, and listened to the connecting tone ring on for a while. Just as I was about to give up and disconnect the call, I suddenly heard a *beep*. A faint breathing sound then caressed my ears.

"..... Yes?"

Mafuyu's voice sounded really fuzzy, as though it had come from the bottom of a swimming pool. Even the background sound of the dogs barking sounded much clearer than her voice, despite it being much further away. The image of Mafuyu throwing her phone to the ground and burying her face in her pillow appeared in my mind.

"Urm..... is your body alright?"

"..... I'm fine."

What a cold reply.

"Really..... but you didn't even take a bite from the bento."

"I ate a little for dinner."

"Is your father..... in Boston?"

"Yes. He won't be back anytime soon."

I had no idea what to say next. The silence, joined by the background noise, continued on for a while. I could even hear the exhaust of the car outside her house. What's with the incredible performance of her phone? Somehow, the silence became even heavier.

"— Hey....." "—Urm....."

Our voices overlapped. Then, we found ourselves in the same situation again, with neither of us speaking. What the heck am I doing? Focus! Aren't I consciously aware of it already? The communication between the two of us is severely lacking.

"..... It's about yesterday."

I finally said it.

"It's about what happened yesterday night. I want to talk about it properly with you. The things that Senpai said."

There was a slight change in Mafuyu's breathing.

"You heard everything right? From when onward were you listening?"

If Mafuyu didn't answer, there'd be no point in me going on and on by myself. I stared at the backpack on the floor and waited.

"..... Kyouko....." Mafuyu replied with a hoarse voice. "She said she had her eyes on you right from the start. What did she mean by that? I did not quite understand."

"That's because....."

I pinched my eyelids and thought for a while. Is that really important? I didn't get it. Anyway, I began explaining it to her from the very beginning—about how I occasionally wrote critiques under Tetsurou's name; how Kagurazaka-senpai felt like there was something out of place, based on those articles alone; and how she realized it was me who wrote those articles.

"So Kyouko had actually noticed something like that."

After I finished explaining, Mafuyu said that.

"If it were me..... I definitely would not have noticed."

It'd be normal for you not to. She's the strange one.

"What are you talking about? That's her....."

"Kyouko always had her sights set on you, right? She pulled me into the band in order to get you in as well."

"That's not it!" The pitch of my voice raised a bit. "Senpai had always been paying attention to you as well. She had planned to get you in the band right from the start. I'm not lying. I heard this from Senpai: while on the roof of the school building, during a certain rainy day in May, she heard the sound of a guitar coming from the courtyard. Remember? Book II of <The Well-Tempered Clavier>, when you used to skip the fugue and play only the preludes. That

was the first time Senpai noticed you, and from then on....."

"I know that."

Mafuyu suddenly interrupted my heated explanation.

"I know that Kyouko..... really likes me. Because she is the sort of person who doesn't lie."

"Mmm. That's why....."

"But I do not care about those things at all."

"Why?"

"Sorry. It's not Kyouko's fault, and neither is it yours. It's just that I..... don't know what I should do."

I had no idea what I should be doing either.

"I..... had never once thought of joining a band, and I do not know anything about rock. Even though Chiaki said it was fine for me to be like this, but..... but I still....."

..... The sounds of sobbing?

"As expected, I know it will not do. I knew that after last night. It's because..... the band would be nothing to me if you were not around, just like how my existence is nothing to the band....."

"I won't leave the band. What are you talking about?"



The things Senpai said before suddenly appeared in my mind again
—"

People can easily, very easily, just suddenly disappear someday and never return."

"It's not that....."

Mafuyu's voice was trembling.

"Because..... you still have Kyouko, right? Even..... Even if I'm not around—"

It was as if the latter half of her sentence were swallowed by darkness. The last part of that sentence finally pierced its way into my heart.

"..... Sorry."

After she hung up the phone, I could still hear the remains of her voice in my ears. It was as though I could feel her silky smooth, long maroon hair, just by moving my shoulders a little.

I still had Senpai..... What does that mean? What exactly was she saying?

"Even if I'm not around—". That was what she said. So that was where the problem lied.

I had no idea how she had gotten herself in that place; however, I finally understood the situation Mafuyu was in, and I knew what sort of place she had shut herself into.

And also—it was much more than just the communication of words that was lacking between us.

But if that's the case..... Just what is lacking between us? And what should I do from here on out?

Chapter 8 - The Other Side of the Globe

The following Monday, Chiaki and I had agreed to meet up at the train station before heading off to school together. During the holidays, some of the teachers on duty wouldn't be at school that early in the morning, so it was possible we wouldn't be able to grab the keys for our morning practice. Because of that, Chiaki had no choice but to give in to me—who loved lazing around in bed—and agree to meet at a later time.

That morning, we didn't manage to find the key to our club's practice room in the key box.

"..... Senpai took it?"

"It's probably her."

We confirmed that with each other. Over the weekend, we had tried calling Mafuyu, but she never picked up.

The two of us made our way to the back of the school building. When we opened the door, a series of intense piano passages overwhelmed us; I shielded my face with my hands without thinking.

In the middle of the cramped classroom, I could almost see the grand piano, and the long maroon hair behind it, swaying along with the rhythm of the melody. However, it was just a brief mirage—there was only the drum set, huddling in the gloomy corner of the room. In front of the mini-amplifier on the left, was the back of someone with braided black hair.

Kagurazaka-senpai was sitting on the round stool, listening to the piano piece; she was almost sprawled over the speakers. The room was engulfed in heat, as she hadn't switched on the air conditioning.

This—This song is—

"..... Hmm? Morning, my fellow comrades."

Senpai turned around to greet us with a smile, despite her looking all worn out. Chiaki pushed the dazed me aside, walked into the

room, and sat down on the chair behind the drum set.

"Senpai, are you okay? You don't look too well....."

"Mmm. I've been listening to this song without sleep since last night. There's absolutely no time for me to relax and rest!"

Then just stop listening to it continuously? I walked into the classroom, then closed the door and switched on the air conditioning.

"What song is this? It's really incredible..... Is it really played by a human being?"

It really was played by a human being. I could tell just by listening to it—the person playing was none other than Mafuyu.

Senpai pressed her face against the speakers and continued listening to the song in silence, so I answered in her place.

"The name of the song is <Islamey>. It's the world's hardest piano piece."

"I see....."

But is that really being played by Mafuyu? I don't remember her releasing that piece.

"This is played by Mafuyu, right? Where did you get your hands on that?"

"Young man, you really recognize immediately if it's a piece played by Mafuyu!"

Because there's no one else who'd play it in that manner! It wasn't the fastest version of <Islamey> I had heard before, but..... In any case, Mafuyu had managed to allow the listeners to clearly discern the section where her left hand was playing notes up and down the scales, and she did this while maintaining a flawless tempo. Since <Islamey> was actually a dance tune, Mafuyu's way of playing might have actually been the correct way of playing the song.

"This is an unreleased recording. I managed to get my hands on it after sneaking into Comrade Ebisawa's house last night."

"What the hell have you done!?" That's definitely a crime, isn't it!?

"I didn't steal this, yeah? It was my second time sneaking into

Comrade Ebisawa's house, and this time, I managed to locate her room successfully. Though I didn't expect her to throw this tape at me in the moment of her fury. Seems like she really dislikes being seen by others when she's listening to piano pieces, so I said nothing else and got out of there as quickly as I could."

"Senpai, you should really be sent to jail. I'll bring some tonics when I visit you." Chiaki's eyes were actually wet.

"Thank you. You are not to fall in love with anyone else while I'm serving my sentence, okay?"

"Mmm!"

"That's not funny at all! Stop fooling around, or I'll really call the cops!"

"Sigh, young man is not the least bit poetic....."

This has nothing to do with being poetic or not! Senpai ignored my protests and picked up her guitar, which was already connected to the amplifiers. After muting her guitar using a palm mute, she began playing notes with almost no intonation to them, using them to gently accompany the chords Mafuyu played through the speakers. It was a sound that made one feel like responding after listening to it.

Zun—a heavy sound rang, followed by a brief and delicate triplet. Chiaki's drums joined in as well, and started off with the subtle beats of the ride cymbals, coupled with the snare drums. As the melody of the piano moved into its climax, Senpai's guitar roared in response; at the same time, Chiaki's drums transitioned into a fervent tempo focused on the bass drums.

I see, it does sound like the traditional dances of Caucasus—very passionate, but unrefined. I removed my guitar case from my shoulders and leaned it against the wall, then sat down on the cushion on the floor. If there were no interruptions, the members of this band could jam on nonstop for several hours—well, aside from me that is. But looking at the current situation..... could I include Mafuyu as well? We're talking about something way beyond my ability—don't they get tired at all?

Whatever. The recorded <Islamey> by Mafuyu had to come to an end. I listened to it in a daze—the piece had lightly skipped through

the slow section in the middle (the part I loved the most), and went straight to the end, before starting all over again from the beginning. W-Wait a second? That's not how the piece is supposed to be, right?

"What's this? Why's it going on forever?"

I couldn't help but stand up and interrupt their performance. Chiaki stopped moving and stared at me with her face red. Senpai laughed and switched off the mini-amplifiers.

"I didn't sleep a wink last night after returning home. After cutting and sampling the piece, I made it repeat on and on nonstop. Now, we can use it as a disco piece! The tempos of Comrade Ebisawa's performances are all very distinct, which makes them suitable for things like this."

"Just stop doing these things and sleep properly! You look really horrible, yeah!?"

"How can I possibly go to sleep when I haven't managed to have a proper talk with Comrade Ebisawa?"

I sank weakly into the cushion on the floor.

That means I was the only one who managed to speak with Mafuyu after the training camp?

"So, what's going on here? We have less than a week before our live performance....."

The actual performance is this Saturday. If this carries on—

"Comrade Ebisawa hasn't even practiced our new piece yet. In any case, let's record it for now! Hey young man, begin the preparations!"

"..... Ah, right."



We burned the whole day recording that song. But since Mafuyu wasn't around, we couldn't decide on the actual arrangement of the piece, so we ended up filling the thirty-minute tape trying out various different arrangements.

"I'll deliver this to her," Chiaki said. "This is for Mafuyu, right?"

"Are you taking it there? Aside from the guards, there are also two Dobermans in her courtyard. I suggest you take the much safer route infiltrating through the underground pipes or something."

"Can't we just visit her normally and openly!?"

"This is the map to the live house. We have a rehearsal on Friday, so remember to ask her to come!"

Senpai completely ignored me and passed the tape, the scores and the live house's handout to Chiaki. Chiaki just stared at the map printed on the handout.

"So..... she may not come here even once till Friday?"

"Mmm..... that's quite possible."

"How could she do that!"

Forget about the rehearsal, she may not even appear for the actual performance—all three of us knew that was a possibility, but we refrained from mentioning it.

Should I follow along as well? Perhaps it'd be better if Chiaki went alone instead..... as it seems I was the one who made Mafuyu angry. Just as I was thinking of that, Chiaki grabbed me by the collar and said, "Nao, you're coming along as well!"

"Uh..... mmm....."

"Don't you want to go?"

"It just feels like..... she'll refuse to see me even if I go?"

"Why?"

"It somehow feels like I've pissed her off or something..... She probably hates me right now."

"Senpai, can I punch him?" Chiaki turned towards Senpai to seek her opinion on the matter.

"If a punch were all it took to solve his denseness, then all the psychologists in the world would be left jobless. Quit your excuses and just be honest with yourself and go along. You have an excuse for meeting Comrade Ebisawa anyway, do you not?"

Senpai shot a glance towards the corner of the room. I followed her gaze and looked in the same direction.

My backpack was stuffed at the very bottom of the shelf, and hanging off of it was the recorder I had borrowed from Mafuyu. It had been there since the training camp was over.

"Yeah..... I guess."

It wouldn't do for us to remain in our current situation. I walked over to pick up the backpack.



Even though the train station closest to Mafuyu's house was on the fringe of the city, quite a lot of passengers still got on and off the trains there, as it was an interchange station that linked the JR and the private railways. In front of the station was a leisurely walkway, paved with red bricks, and a shopping arcade. I had gone to that area a few times before to shop for books as well. When we were about a hundred meters away from the station, we saw a lot fewer people out on the streets. And as we walked on, the houses surrounding us gradually merged in with the scenery of dusk.

We had expected to get lost, but it turned out we had worried for nothing; Mafuyu's house was incredibly large, to the point that we could easily spot it without even needing to confirm with the map.

I originally thought it was a park with coniferous trees in it—but after aligning the surrounding utility poles with the map on her handphone, Chiaki said, "Mmm, this is it." Amid the trees, we finally found a large black arching gate with inverted spikes, and past the arching gate was a building that looked like a museum or something. So Ebichiri's that rich huh.....

"Ah, there really are dogs in the courtyard! Ain't those Dobermans cute? There, they're looking in our direction!"

Chiaki slid her hand between the rails of the gate and waved enthusiastically at the black shadows sitting next to the flowerbed. What the heck are you here for?

We then found an intercom, and its associated buzzer, on the doorpost at the side of the gate.

"Will the dogs come pouncing on us with bared teeth if I press this button?" Chiaki asked.

"How's that possible!?"

But even so, we dared not press the intercom buzzer for a long time. What should we do if Mafuyu answers? I wasn't mentally prepared for that yet, and had no idea what to say to her if I ended up seeing her.

"Heh!" In the end, it was Chiaki who pressed the button. It felt like the black silhouettes of the dogs had moved a little, causing me to instinctively hide myself behind the doorpost.

A short while later, a woman's voice came from the intercom.

"..... Yes? May I know who this is?"

That's—not Mafuyu's voice. The female voice sounded way more mature.

"..... U-Urm, well....."

Chiaki pushed my face aside and spoke into the intercom,

"Good evening, I'm Aihara. I am..... Mafuyu's fellow clubmate, from the high school she is attending. She didn't come to today's practice. So, thinking she might be feeling unwell, we have come to visit her. We have some things we want to pass on to her as well."

I was impressed with how fluently Chiaki said all that; there wasn't the slightest hint of stuttering. She's lying about us visiting Mafuyu because we think she's sick, but we do have things we want to pass on to her, so they might actually allow us to enter. Chiaki was probably playing it by ear—as for me, what have I done here? I'll have to buck up as well!

"Please hold on for a moment."

After the woman said that, the intercom fell silent.

"Will Mafuyu come out?" Chiaki mumbled.

"I don't know."

Then again, since Chiaki didn't mention my name just now, perhaps.....

I sat down at the base of the doorpost. Even though the sun was below the horizon, the asphalt still felt incredibly hot.

I could suddenly hear the sounds of someone walking on the turf. I

stood up immediately.

Someone was walking through the spacious courtyard and towards the door. It was a tall woman with short hair; she was wearing a grey suit and long pants. She patted the Dobermans that had walked up next to her, and made them sit down before she came to the door.

"Sorry for making you two wait."

She was young—probably between twenty-five and thirty years old. Her hair was cut rather short, which made her face look fresh and neat. She was wearing a pair of elegant earrings as well. Who is she? Mafuyu's family? Nope, doesn't look quite like it.

The woman walked out through a small door located at the side of the gate, then bowed to Chiaki and me.

"I am the person in charge of tending to the daily lives of Maestro Ebisawa and the young lady. Despite having both of you travel all the way here, my mistress is unable to meet you."

"Is she feeling unwell?"

Chiaki took a step forward and asked worriedly with her brows furrowed.

"No. My mistress has instructed me to pass on the message that she is feeling unwell, but I am afraid that is probably a lie."

Despite her courteous manners, her words were rather direct.

"Maestro Ebisawa has overly doted on our young lady, which has resulted in her being unable to listen to anything when her tantrum kicks in. I apologize to you two on behalf of my mistress. If there is anything you wish to pass on to her, you can do so through me."

How should we respond when she speaks to us in such a solemn and serious manner? While I was thinking of something to say, Chiaki handed her the live house handout, the scores of our new song and the tape.

"Is that all? Did she not say anything else?"

From the tone of Chiaki's voice, it felt as though she was about to cling herself to the woman.

"No. Nothing at all."

"You should have told her my name, right?"

"Yes. I told Mistress that Miss Aihara and a man had come over to visit her."

She didn't tell her my name—did Mafuyu know it was me? Then again, I don't think there'd be any other guy who would come looking for her, right? And that means..... that she really is unwilling to see me?

"At the very least, Mafuyu can tell us that herself via the intercom, right?" Chiaki refused to give in.

"My mistress has no intention of leaving her room at all."

"Then we will communicate through pen and paper! Miss, please help us to pass our message to her!"

"That's enough, Chiaki."

I grabbed Chiaki by the shoulders and pulled her away before she troubled the woman any further. I then lowered my head and apologized.

"I'm really sorry. Urm..... we have no choice but to trouble you to pass those items on to her. And also, please tell her there's a rehearsal on Friday. Tell her to make her way down to the place marked on the map at three o'clock."

"Yes. I will definitely convey that to Mistress."

She didn't show the slightest smile while answering—what a strange person. As for Chiaki, she was grabbing me tightly by the arm and whimpering softly, just like a dog..... Just give up already!

Just as I was about to make my way back to the station, dragging Chiaki along with me—

"Please hold on a second."

I turned my head in response to her call, and saw the woman walk towards us in quick steps.

"Could it be, that you are actually Mr. Hikawa Naomi?"

"..... Eh? Yeah. That's me."

Chiaki looked at me in surprise, and then, at the woman.

"I see. I am sorry for calling out to you all of a sudden. Mistress

always talks about Mr. Hikawa."

Mafuyu—she always talks about me? Mmm, I think Ebichiri said something similar as well, but is that really true?

"..... She always talks about me?"

"Yes. She says you are dense, unreliable and mouthy, and that she always gets angry whenever she is with you."

She sure doesn't mince words!

"Yes, that's exactly how it is!" Chiaki chipped in.

"However, she frequently uses the term 'unreliable' for her father as well. Therefore, I think that might just be her way of showing how dear the two of you are to her."

"Haa.....?"

No, wait, you don't have to put it that way just to console me, yeah? In any case, I'm just a.....

While I was acting all depressed, the woman suddenly handed me her name-card.

"I am sorry for introducing myself only now. My name is Matsumura. Please do not hesitate to contact me if it has anything to do with our young lady. Honestly speaking, I am not too sure how I should interact with my mistress as well. I would be more confident in doing so if I had the chance to interact with Mr. Hikawa and Mistress's fellow schoolmates."

Miss Matsumura continued to speak with us with the same emotionless expression and unfaltering voice. She passed a name-card to Chiaki as well.

There was nothing about her position, or the name of any company, printed on the name-card—just her name "Matsumura Hitomi" and her handphone number. That accomplished just about nothing for your self-introduction, yeah?

"It was great meeting the two of you."

Miss Matsumura bowed again before making her way back to the mansion.

"..... What a strange person."

Chiaki murmured, as she stuffed the name-card in her pocket.

"But she should be trained in martial arts or something."

"You can actually tell?"

"Mmm, because she keeps her center of gravity really stable when she moves. She's probably Mafuyu's personal bodyguard?"

In any case, it's good to have someone I can contact, and I might even get the chance to ask her about Mafuyu's situation. However, our live performance is only six days away. Is there really nothing we can do?

"So aside from the two Dobermans, we'll also have to take down that woman before we can see Mafuyu?"

Chiaki said something really dangerous in a soft voice.

"Ahh—I've had enough! I'll break in through the front!"

Chiaki turned around. I quickly grabbed her by the shoulders to prevent her from walking back to the mansion.

"Let me go! I'm an elite beginner dan in Judo, so it won't be a problem!"

"No way!"

A well-trained Doberman is the strongest living creature on the planet!

"But Mafuyu's really going overboard with this!"

Chiaki suddenly grabbed me by the collar, slid her leg in-between both of mine and swept me off the ground. My butt landed hard on the ground. It hurts.....

When I raised my head, I saw Chiaki put on a serious expression with tears in her eyes.

"But we're bandmates! Hearing the palm mutes twice and the sound of the hi-hat four times is all Mafuyu and I need to understand what the other is about to do next. That's the understanding we've developed after just one month of playing together! If we wanted to, we could even jam on for five or six hours without stopping, and yet Mafuyu....."

Chiaki knelt down to punch my shoulders—it was a really weak

punch.

"All Mafuyu thinks of is Nao! Isn't..... isn't that just unfair for the rest of us!?"

She only thinks about me.

Chiaki's body relaxed all of a sudden. I caught her by the shoulders to prevent her from collapsing onto me.

All Mafuyu thinks about is me—is that really true? Perhaps it was. The problem was actually only between Mafuyu and me, but it somehow escalated into something that caused feketerigó to lose her right arm, bringing her to the brink of collapse—there was still no changing Kagurazaka-senpai's cruel fate.

It was really..... sad.

"..... Sorry."

Chiaki said that as she stood up, using my shoulders for support. Her head hung low the entire time..... is she crying?

"It's nothing. I'm not crying."

Chiaki shook her head vigorously. She left me behind as she began making her way back to the station. I hurriedly caught up to her, but hesitated to walk by her side.

"Chiaki, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm a beginner dan in Judo, so I'm really strong."

Those aren't related at all, okay? Chiaki's voice was unnaturally cheerful. She quickened her pace to walk about a half step in front of me, but never turned her head around, disallowing me from continuing our conversation.



Mafuyu didn't appear in the club room the following day as well. Chiaki and Kagurazaka-senpai were actively discussing the tracks we'd be singing for the performance, as well as what we'd be wearing on stage. However, they didn't mention anything about Mafuyu.

"I want to make the T-shirts for feketerigó. About ten of them."

"It'll look really stupid if all of us wore the same shirt up on stage, yeah?"

"I'll be the only one wearing it. The rest of the band members will get one too, and as for the remaining shirts, I'll sell them for four thousand yen each."

"That sounds pretty good. Let's start by designing the logo."

I sat in a corner of the room hugging my bass, and looked at Chiaki and Senpai from a distance, as they tried to come up with a logo for the shirt in a strangely enthusiastic way. That name was something Mafuyu had come up with—how did they manage to talk about it without feeling anything?

The two of them suddenly quietened down. They looked gloomily at the amplifiers to the right of the entrance—the place Mafuyu had always stood—and that caused my chest to hurt.

I see. The reason the both of them only chatted and didn't touch their instruments was because—

It was because there would be music whenever we were all together. All Senpai had to do was signal with her eyes; Chiaki would then twirl her drumsticks; and Mafuyu would draw her eyelids back slightly and stare at the strings next to her hands. Next, the jam session would begin, and would flow on and on, as though the concept of time didn't exist.

And I'd exhaust myself trying my hardest not to be left behind in their wake.

If Mafuyu ends up not appearing at the rehearsal or the actual performance, what should we do? A band with a member missing was not something as simple as four minus one equals three—it was almost equal to zero. Does Mafuyu understand that?

I couldn't help but lay my eyes on Senpai. Will she come up with something like she always does? She always scattered some weird seeds in places I would never have thought of.

When Senpai noticed me looking at her, she flashed a slight smile and waved at me.

I moved my chair next to the drum set and sat down.

"Yes?"

"I'll just state this clearly—I won't be doing anything this time."

"Eh.....?"

Chiaki looked at me, and then at Senpai, with an uneasy expression on her face.

"Urm....."

She's referring to the situation regarding Mafuyu, right? But for some reason, it was hard for me to say her name at a time like this.

"I won't be doing anything for two reasons. One, should Comrade Ebisawa not show up here ever again, then it'll be my win. Though the victory would be helplessly sad and empty."

"What's the thing you'd win?"

"Actually, that's not a result I want. My victory shouldn't be built on the loss of others. But it's not like I have a choice in the matter. While I am a revolutionist and a musician, at the same time, I am also a woman in love."

What the heck is this person talking about? While I was dumbfounded by that, Chiaki picked up a drumstick and pointed it at Senpai's chest.

"Senpai, you've involved yourself in too many romances!"

"Can't help it, I was born that way! Romance makes up about eighty percent of me!"

"And the remaining twenty?"

"Thirty percent is lust, and ten percent is crushes."

"That's all the same, isn't it!"

"..... There's an excess of twenty percent, yeah?"

"And the second reason—this is not my fight." Don't ignore my question and just move back to the original topic as you wish! "If it were for my own victory, I'd resort to all means to plant the seeds of possibility everywhere I could, and just wait for spring to come. However, this time around, it's your fight. Like back then, I don't mind lending you a helping hand should you need assistance; however, I won't proactively do anything."

I shifted my gaze from Senpai's knees to the floor.

"..... Since I'm not a poetic person, can you please put it in simpler terms I can understand?"

Actually, I had some idea of what Senpai was trying to say.

It was probably something to be expected, and something that was important. Senpai planted her hands firmly on my shoulders and said,

"Come up with something by yourself."

Senpai's words permeated through my entire body, all the way down to my feet.

I nodded my head slowly.



"Lil' Nao, I'm done with my articles already! Hurry up and prepare my meal! I want something luxurious!"

Upon reaching home, I saw Tetsurou dashing towards the door. It looked like he was about to pounce on me, so I removed one of my shoes and threw it at him for good measure.

"My feelings of joy will not be extinguished by something like this!"

The overture of [**<A Midsummer Night's Dream>**](#) by Mendelssohn was blaring loudly from the direction of the living room. Tetsurou would always listen to that song whenever he finished writing major articles. He had dark circles under his eyes and some stubble on his face, as the publisher had kidnapped him and locked him up yesterday to force him to write the articles.

"..... Did you eat your meals properly?"

"Those people placed me under house arrest, and banned me from calling room service! I was forced to eat microwave fried rice with crab meat."

"Oh, is that so? Then I'll cook fried rice without crab meat for tonight's dinner."

"Nao's kindness has brought me to tears!"

"Then I'll hold back on the salt as well."

"Why do you say nothing but cruel words? What sort of upbringing did you experience for you to have become so difficult to deal with? I really want to take a look at the person who raised you to be the person you are today!"

"That person is none other than you!"

I had originally wanted to drag him to the mirror in front of the washing basin, but that would've taken too much effort, so I dropped the idea.

While I was preparing dinner in the kitchen, the suite playing in the living room entered the famous wedding march, which really made me feel like dying. Why the hell must I listen to such joyous songs together with Tetsurou when I'm in such a bad mood!? Why!? Hurry up and move on to the funeral march already!

"Why are we having kimchi jjigae despite the hot weather?"

Tetsurou complained when he saw me placing dinner on the table. Shut up. It's because it's easier to prepare stew, that's why!

"Don't eat if you don't like it!" I stared fiercely at Tetsurou while helping myself to some rice. He had already filled his bowl with grilled tofu and beef rump, and was eating with huge bites. Can't do anything about him. Then again, I had always been curious—this guy always washes his food down with sake..... is his sense of taste really okay?

"You're the child of Misako and me, so why is Nao's cooking so good?"

"It's because both of you don't know how to cook!"

I did occasionally worry about whether Misako could live properly by herself or not.

"Ah, is that so? I see, so that's how it is. Well well, I was wondering for a second if you were actually my real child or not."

"I sometimes wonder if I'm Tetsurou's child or not as well!"

"Don't worry. It's not your fault."

"And it's all yours, Tetsurou!"

I had no idea what I was talking about with him.

After he finished the sake, Tetsurou began drinking whiskey, pairing it up with the stewed vegetables at the bottom of the pot.

"Then again, it's not like Misako and I broke up because we were cheating on each other, so you shouldn't be the child of another man."

Why the heck is he saying things like this in front of his real son?

"We used to be very much in love! I mean, you know it well, but I'm not dependable, and I don't know how to read the mood of others. But it just so happened to be that Misako was someone who didn't harbor any ulterior motives behind her actions, so we were very direct with each other."

"Really? That's good."

"And since you're very similar to me, it's pointless for you to dwell on problems you have with women! Just give up already!"

"I'm not troubled—"

"But you haven't said anything about the training camp at all! You definitely wouldn't talk about it if I were hounding you enthusiastically—but this time, I haven't asked you anything at all! Since you haven't talked about it, you must've done something you can't say to your father, right? Damn, you bastard, you actually went to a villa near the beach with three cute girls for three days and two nights! Why didn't you bring me along with you? Sex education should continue up until you've reached the age of eighteen!"

I poured water directly onto Tetsurou's head, which caused him to quiet down. This guy here can be quite sharp sometimes for absolutely no reason. How very irritating.

I didn't have much of an appetite, so Tetsurou ended up finishing most of the pot of kimchi jjigae—which served three—by himself. After I finished washing the dishes, I grabbed a glass of wheat tea and went to the living room. Tetsurou was sprawled all over the sofa and was hugging the whiskey bottle. He suddenly said,

"..... Hey, do you know what Misako said to me when she decided to divorce me?"

"Why are you bringing that up all of a sudden? How would I know!"

I was only six back then, so I had no ability to understand things that weren't directly related to me.

"She said nothing at all. And I said nothing either."

It was rare for our living room to not be filled with the sound of music, and because of that, Tetsurou's words lingered stagnantly in the air. He sank himself deep into the sofa opposite of me, and kept staring at the water droplets on the outer surface of the glass.

"Misako said she didn't want you hearing us talking about things like that, so we said nothing in the end. On that day, I was lying on the sofa listening to Mendelssohn, just like I was doing earlier. The wedding march was playing when Misako returned home from work. At that time, I could almost see a flash of electricity. We both came to a consensus right after that."

Tetsurou's tone was too sober for it to be one of his drunk jokes.

"The next morning, it became a situation of 'Have you stamped it already?' 'Then I'll take it to the district office'—like that. It would've been a wonderful scene if it had happened during our wedding, but sadly, we were about to divorce each other. A ha ha!"

That's not funny at all..... and the two of you didn't even think about what to do with me? Though I expected that anyway.

"There are a lot of things..... that cannot be conveyed with just words alone."

That line from Tetsurou made me raise my head.

"In my line of work, it's like I confirm that fact every single day. Those guys were born on the other side of the globe about two to three hundred years ago, and they were living lives that were totally different from ours—and yet, the songs they've composed still touch our hearts, even now. You'll never succeed by just clearly saying what's on your mind, because the power of words can't overcome what's in our hearts. Wow, that's quite a statement from me! I'll write it down in my next critique."

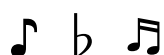
"You're just copying the lyrics from Chage and Aska!"^[1]

"Who cares, it's not like I have a girl whom I'm in love with right now! But if I met a girl who didn't talk about anything, like Misako—then I'd probably be a little envious of Nao, who still has a chance to

do something."

The chance to do something..... huh? Which means I can no longer be someone who simply accepts and critiques in return? But what does that change? What can I possibly convey to Mafuyu with the way I am now?

As I was about to reply with that, Tetsurou was already snoring.



After my bath, I returned to my bedroom and sat down next to my bed. On the desk was my handphone, and next to the phone was the tape recorder I had borrowed from Mafuyu.

I didn't pass the recorder on to Miss Matsumura back then. I couldn't.

It felt like if I had asked someone to pass that back to Mafuyu, the bonds between Mafuyu and me would disappear.

But when should I return this to her? Since I'm holding on to it without letting it go, doesn't that just prove I'm a really useless person?

"There are a lot of things that cannot be conveyed with just words alone."

That's what Tetsurou said. And that may very well be the case—there really are a lot of things that can't be conveyed with just words. But why did it have to happen at a time like this? The live performance is less than a week away!

I grabbed my handphone and called Mafuyu. After ringing three times, the connecting tone was cut off, and I was directed to her voice mail. When I heard the mechanical tone asking me to leave a message, I suddenly felt a surge of anger within me.

"..... Mafuyu? It's me. You shouldn't forget that I still have your mother's memento in my possession. If you don't come to practice, I don't know what'll happen to it! And also, you better come to the rehearsal as well, so stop creating trouble for the rest of us already! That's all!"

I hung up after saying what I wanted to say.

Perhaps she won't hear what I said, but I couldn't stay silent.

My head felt like it was burning. It was already night, but the temperature was still high. I decided to just head to sleep. It was a few minutes later that I realized I had said "your mother's memento" during the voice message. I rolled about on the wooden floor and felt like dying. Her mother's not even dead yet! Why did I say something like that!?

Notes

1. [Wiki link](#)

Chapter 9 - The Song of Blackbird

The live house we were supposed to perform at was located in a neighboring city, and stood in the center of a quiet residential area.

If I had taken the train there, I would've had to transfer lines and travel for quite some distance—so I decided to just ride a bicycle instead. It was a Friday, and the sky was filled with dark clouds—it was the day of our rehearsal.

As I traveled along the side road, that lay next to the national highway and that followed the outskirts of the city, I saw old houses lined up together, as well as warehouses of the People's Association and more. The first floor of the building the live house was located in was filled with offices, while the second floor and above consisted of apartments. At the entrance of the building was a huge notice board, filled with all sorts of posters and advertisements. In various colored chalk, the events of the night were detailed on a small blackboard on a tripod stand.

The signboard of the live house wasn't very big, and printed on it was the name of the shop "Bright" in a white cursive font.

Speaking of which, even though it's located in such a remote area, Bright is actually quite famous around here. I had heard quite a few bands and their fans had actually traveled all the way from Tokyo just to come to this place.

It was three when I reached Bright, and the sun was still shining high above me. There were already a few large cars parked in the gravel parking lot next to the building. There were some young men loitering around the entrance that led underground, and judging from their hairstyle and the clothes they wore, they didn't seem to be your typical civilians.

I saw a familiar person among those people, and heaved a sigh of relief. Hiroshi was wearing a black vest that emphasized his well-toned body; it also made it easy for people to see the chameleon

tattoo on his arm.

There was a guy with long hair standing next to Hiroshi. The man was biting down on an unlit cigarette, and the bandanna on his head nearly covered his eyes. He carried a guitar on his back, and his silhouette seemed to give off a dangerous aura—somehow, I had seen him before somewhere.

"Yo! You're here already. Kyouko's already in the basement."

Hiroshi happened to spot me as well, and waved his hand to invite me over. Thank god for that, as I didn't have the guts to walk into a place like that by myself. I shrunk my neck and walked slowly towards Hiroshi, passing by the other rockers on my way. He then suddenly pointed at the person next to him and said,

"This guy's Furukawa. He's our lead singer."

"Hey you, you must be laughing to yourself whenever you call me the lead singer, yeah? Quit making cold jokes about me being a funny lead singer or something, alright?"

The long-haired guy's tone seemed to indicate he wasn't joking; he even shoved Hiroshi's shoulder.

"Well, that's okay, cause I'm the funny guitarist too!"

"Shut your trap."



Ah..... could this person be.....?

"Sorry, are you actually..... TAISEI?"

So that's why I found him familiar-looking—he had appeared in one of the magazines I had written critiques for. It was a very serious magazine about classical music, so it was really rare for them to publish an interview with the guitarist of a rock band. That was why he made a lasting impression on me.

"That's the name I use when I'm playing as Melancholy Chameleon. Right now, my name's Furukawa Taisei," TAISEI, no wait, Furukawa stared at me with a sullen expression on his face.

"Oi, you don't know anything about me, so why do you know about Furukawa?"

"Eh? Ah, because the magazine 'Friends of Musicians' published an article about him once....."

"That's a magazine about classical music, right? Ah, I think you said something like that before? Ain't that good for you, Taisei? You've gotten a new fan for yourself who has come from another area of music!"

"Just shut up already. Isn't it about time we go in?"

Furukawa walked down the stairs. I stopped Hiroshi as he was about to follow Furukawa.

"..... Urm, did Mafuyu come?"

"Hmm?"

"She's the mixed-blood....."

"Ah! You mean the cutest girl? The one who's always angry? She's not here yet!"

"..... I see....."

I couldn't help but lift my head to look at the gloomy sky as I walked down the stairs. I dazed out for a while.

Mafuyu didn't attend any of the practices at school, and didn't pick up any of our calls. Which meant..... she probably won't come today either?

"She's the girl you said you quarreled with?"

As we were walking down the stairs, Hiroshi suddenly stopped in his tracks and turned around to ask me that. The tattooed

chameleon shone brightly before my eyes, which shocked me.

"..... Eh? Well..... we haven't quite reached the state of quarreling yet....."

"I see. Then can I make a move on Kyouko while you're still hesitating?"

"Haa.....?"

I missed my step and nearly rolled down the stairs. I quickly regained my balance by leaning my body against the wall. I could hear multiple footsteps approaching from behind me, so I moved my face close to Hiroshi's and asked in a low voice,

"What do you mean? Why are you suddenly asking that?"

"Nothing much. I thought it would be better if I confirmed something first."

"But why are you confirming with me? Speaking of which, urm..... what sort of relationship do you share with Senpai?"

"Hmm? How old are you? Shouldn't be older than eighteen, right?"

"I'm only in my first year in high school."

"Mmm..... then I can't tell you just yet. Wait till you're older before you ask me that question again!"

So what's their relationship? Now I'm really curious.

After we finished that conversation that left me hanging, we found ourselves at the bottom of the long flight of stairs, and what appeared before us was a sturdy soundproof wall. That reminds me, this is the first time I've been to a live house. I was really nervous.

I followed Hiroshi and slipped my body horizontally past the heavy doors of the shop. A stinging smell that consisted of a mixture of cigarette smoke, sweat and alcohol, assaulted my nose.

Despite the place being very spacious, I couldn't shake off my difficulty breathing. At a short distance away from the door, there were a few round tables and chairs scattered about, and further in, was a slightly old bar positioned under some purple and red neon lights. Additionally, an area of bare concrete could be found to my left, and across that, a stage could be seen. They seemed to be conducting checks on the footlights, which shone mercilessly on

Kagurazaka-senpai, who was fiddling with her effects units on the stage. Chiaki was also there, helping carry the microphone stands. Both girls were wearing a miniskirt and a short T-shirt that nearly showed their navel. They were quite careless to be standing at an elevated level in that attire..... but it should be fine, right?

"Are all the members here? What? Not yet?"

A sweaty man with a bandanna on his head was yelling at Senpai from the side of the stage. Looks like he's the person in charge of the audio equipment. I quickly ran to the side of the stage.

"Young man, did you see her when you were above?"

Senpai was looking downwards and focused on the task at hand when she asked me that. She should be asking about Mafuyu. I shook my head in silence.

"I see."

Senpai's answer was rather uncaring.

However, Chiaki came running over hastily.

"Is Mafuyu not here yet? I'll give her a call."

"Ah, let me do it."

Tuning the drum set is probably the most time-consuming task, right? I passed her my bass while thinking that, and took my phone out as I walked out of the shop. I climbed up the winding stairs and back to the surface. After exiting, it felt like I could finally breathe again.

But despite the numerous calls I made, Mafuyu didn't pick up. I don't know if the harsh words in my voice mail had made things worse, but she didn't even enable voice messages this time. The hand holding my phone was trembling, and the disconnect tones slid down my throat as though I had accidentally swallowed some marbles.

Is she really planning to not show up without even saying anything? I had no idea what she was pissed off about, but..... gimme a break!

What will Senpai and Chiaki think about this—

Something suddenly came to my mind. I opened up my wallet and

pulled out a name-card, then made yet another call on my phone—I had inputted the wrong number a few times during the process.

"..... Yes? This is Matsumura speaking."

The voice sounded as cold as ice. The woman had said she was the one in charge of taking care of Mafuyu. I recalled the glamorous mansion Mafuyu lived in, and those fierce-looking Dobermans, then unconsciously wiped the sweat off my palms using my jeans.

"U-Urm, I'm Hikawa, the person who visited the mansion a few days ago."

"Right. I am sorry for what happened back then. May I ask if it is something about our young lady?"

"Y-Yes. May I know if Mafuyu..... Mafuyu-san—Well, today's the rehearsal....."

"My mistress was squatting in front of the door with her guitar at noon. I could not bear to see her in that state, so I brought her back into the house—"

"Eh? T-Then where is she now?"

"She has locked herself in her room and refuses to come out."

I was stunned for a while. I then collapsed butt-first onto the ground and heaved a heavy sigh.

So she..... had planned on coming? But should I be at ease because of that right now?

"Which means..... it's not possible for her to come down today?"

"She should be able to if I am to break open the door and cuff her using handcuffs."

"T-That's not necessary. Please do not do that."

Hey you..... can you not say such scary things in such a calm manner?

"Pardon me for asking, but is tomorrow the actual performance of the band?"

"Hmm? Yeah."

"If that is the case—"

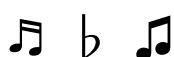
Miss Matsumura paused for a moment, as though she was thinking about how she should word her sentence.

"I am really sorry, but I may have to trouble one of you to make your way down tomorrow to pick up my mistress . I will try to come up with some way to restrain her."

Restrain? You're not even going to try to convince her? Somehow, it felt like she was someone who would really tie Mafuyu up with ropes and such. Scary.

Which means—it'll be my responsibility to convince Mafuyu?

"..... Alright. Please do that."



"So that means, it'll just be the three of us rehearsing today."

I went back to the basement and told them about the conversation I had on the phone. Senpai replied rather calmly with that sentence. But Chiaki, who was standing in front of the drum set, looked as though she had something stuck in her throat.

There were lots of personnel around the stage: the Bright staff in their blue uniforms, the members of Hiroshi's band, and another group of performers, slightly older than the rest of us. Everyone was busy making sure the lights and the audio system were working properly. Despite the air conditioning, the place was filled with such an intense heat that people would sweat even if they were just standing about and not moving.

"Young man, we don't have much time left, so start preparing! There'll be people rehearsing on stage after us, so stop dilly-dallying!"

I nodded my head and put on an expression that looked as though I had just drunk something really bitter. I then picked up my bass from the stand.

Mafuyu wasn't there, so I had no idea where I should've been standing on the stage. When the four of us practiced together, Senpai would always stand directly in front of Chiaki, and I'd be on Senpai's left, and Mafuyu on her right—that was how it should've been.

"Start with the drums. Hurry!"

The sound effects crew yelled angrily through the PA system. Chiaki began to tap out a sluggish set of sixteen beats with her feet, forcing me to focus my attention on the music.



"You gotta be kidding me! You're asking a band like that to be the opening act?"

We heard a furious shout just as we finished our third song. I jumped in fright and turned around to look at the entrance of the green room, located to the left of the stage. Furukawa was hollering at Hiroshi.

The opening act—which meant he was referring to us. Did we rub him the wrong way? The personnel present were all looking at the two of them from a distance, with troubled expressions on their faces.

"I said that someone's not there, right?"

"What sort of bullshit excuse is that? We're talking about a rehearsal here, and she's not here!? Oi! Kyouko!"

Furukawa pushed Hiroshi aside and climbed onstage. I reflexively retreated back a step, and nearly tripped over the wires on the floor.

"I said this before, yeah? I don't care if it's your band, but if I'm not satisfied with your performance during the rehearsal, then you won't be getting up on stage. Or do you think you have the liberty of looking down on this just because it's a casual gig?"

Furukawa was as overbearing as a mad dog. If our performance today was unsatisfactory, we wouldn't be allowed to take the stage—so they had actually agreed on this beforehand?

"I did agree to that....." Senpai placed her guitar down and wiped off her sweat before continuing, "So? What do you want here?"

"Nothing! We could still joke about it if it were just the sound that was lacking, but that's not the only problem here! It's like you're deliberately screwing things up!"

"I like Taisei the most~! 'Cause you always tell the truth."

"Don't you try laughing it off!"

Furukawa pointed his index finger at Senpai's chest.

"With your skills, you should be able make up for the missing person during the performance, right? But you're just standing there leisurely playing your solo!"

"The person not here today will definitely be here tomorrow."

"You guys had a quarrel, right? I just found out about it. What'll you do if she doesn't come down tomorrow? Since she's not here right now, you should've gone up on stage with the mindset that she won't be here tomorrow!"

"No way."

Senpai pushed Furukawa away with force. I could feel Hiroshi, who was behind me, forcing himself to swallow the words that were about to come out of his mouth. That applied to me as well—I couldn't say anything at all.

"I don't even want to consider the possibility of her not showing up tomorrow."

"What are you saying.....?"

"So..... even though I'm letting Hiroshi down, we won't be going on stage if she doesn't come down tomorrow."

"Oi! Kyouko! Don't be so rash—"

Furukawa turned his head around and interrupted Hiroshi.

"Hiroshi, don't you step into this!" He then turned back to face Senpai. "Since you put it that way, fine! Just carry on with your bullshit rehearsal as you please! I'll be outside for now, as I have no intention of listening to something that'll cause my ears to rot! Tell me when you guys are done!"

Furukawa pushed the onlookers aside and walked past the shop in huge strides. He then pushed open the soundproof door with his shoulders and stormed out of the place.

The stagnant and heavy silence continued on for a long while.

"..... Senpai....."

Chiaki squeezed her voice out from behind the drums.

"Sorry, I'm always deciding things by myself..... But can you guys go along with me?"

Chiaki directed her gaze at me, but I lacked the courage to accept it; so I lowered my head and looked at the messy wires beneath me instead. The footlights were blinding me.

"Sorry, but we want to continue with our rehearsal."

Senpai shouted in the direction of the PA console.

The next piece was my song, and the bass was the instrument leading the melody. Despite that, though, it was like my fingers were stuck to the strings of my bass—they couldn't move.

If Mafuyu really doesn't come tomorrow.....

That was something I was unwilling to consider for even a second.

But she really didn't come down. Even after the sun had circled the Earth once, and time had fast-forwarded to the final rehearsal, on the very same day of the performance, Mafuyu didn't appear.



The next day—

It was four in the afternoon. My phone rang—it was Chiaki. I had just arrived at Bright, and was parking my bicycle in the corner of the parking area. I hastily took the handphone out of the back-pocket of my jeans.

"Yes? Did something happen?"

Even before Chiaki spoke, I already had a bad feeling about all this.

"Mafuyu..... they said Mafuyu disappeared!"

Chiaki panted into the phone.

"Wha....."

Shaaa All I heard was something scrapping against my jeans. For a long while, my mind was blank. I didn't even realize my bicycle had fallen on the ground, or that the spinning wheels were dirtying my shoes.

"Where are you now? At Mafuyu's house?"

"Mmm. Miss Matsumura told me about it."

Chiaki was tasked with picking Mafuyu up from her house. We planned to borrow Hiroshi's drum set for the actual performance, so we asked Chiaki to help transport the drum set and pick up Mafuyu from her house along the way—or, that was what we had planned.

But Mafuyu has disappeared?

"Disappeared..... what's going on there?"

"It seems like..... she ran away from home again."

Oh, I see. Running away from home. Again. I could suddenly feel my brain enter a surprisingly calm state—so Mafuyu disappeared yet again without saying anything.

Then..... what should we do?

"..... What should we do?"

Chiaki repeated my thought with a voice close to crying.

"Just come down to Bright for now. It's not like you can do much there. Hiroshi and his drummer are with you, right? They have to rehearse as well."

Somehow, my voice sounded like it had come from an old recording.

After the call was cut off, I began to think of how I should break the news to Senpai and Furukawa.

Mafuyu disappeared. I didn't manage to convey my words to her heart. *"Come up with something by yourself"*—Senpai's words reverberated in my ears again. But did I try doing anything at all? All I did was look on from the sides, as the events flowed past me, just like I had always done. I was actually the person standing closest to Mafuyu, in a place where I could touch her just by stretching my arms out.....



"And so, what do you guys wanna do?" Furukawa asked.

I walked down to the basement and reported the contents of Chiaki's call to Furukawa and Senpai, who was adjusting the balance

of the microphone stand. That was the first sentence I heard when I was done informing them. Members of the staff, in blue shirts, were walking all over the stage, and the sounds of the instruments streaked through the burning air.

What should we do? He's actually asking us what we want to do? Why is he asking us that question!? I was well aware I was in an anxious and irritated state.

Mafuyu's not coming. Do you even need to ask? Just hurry up and kick us off the stage! Senpai, you too! Tell him we're unable to perform today!

However, Furukawa said nothing, and just stared at Senpai instead. Senpai looked at him and said,

"There are still three hours till the actual performance."

"Are you a moron!?"

Furukawa asked indignantly; I felt the same way as well. Is Senpai a moron?

"We planned a rehearsal today as well! What'll you do if she doesn't come despite you guys waiting for her? It'll be really troublesome for us if we're informed at the very last minute, that we'll have to take the stage at an earlier time!"

Then you might as well free us from our misery! Why are you asking things like "What will we do"? I don't get him at all.

"Taisei, I know that. But even so—"

Kagurazaka-senpai pressed the microphone hard into her chest. I could hear shrill feedback coming from the monitor speakers.

"I still want to wait. Can I? I'll do anything I can to make it up to you, for the troubles we've caused."

"It's not about you making it up to us or not! I don't give a damn about whether that last member of yours is coming or not! At a time like this, you should be prepared to take the stage with just the three of you, yeah? I can spare more time for you guys to practice, and it'll be fine if you even want to change the songs you're performing! I really have no idea why you're so insistent on her!"

"But..... this is not just my band. So I can't do that."

I could clearly see the cowardice in Senpai's eyes as she said that. The fearless Kagurazaka-senpai was actually being timid? I could hardly believe it.

I already had a bad premonition about this the night of our training camp. But even so, with the truth right before my very eyes, I was so depressed I could hardly breathe.

This person here—she had gradually lost all her bandmates because of things like this.

And that's why she's right now is afraid of losing Mafuyu. She's afraid of losing feketerigó.

I couldn't bear to see Senpai in a state like that. However, I was totally helpless—

A sudden gush of wind rushed into the live house. Furukawa and I turned our head around at the same time, and saw Chiaki rushing in after pushing the door open. Hiroshi and the others behind her were carrying the drums wrapped in cloth.

"Nao, Senpai!"

Chiaki ran towards us. Her eyes were red and puffy from her tears. There were stains of her sweat on her white-colored shirt, which had our band logo spray painted onto it.

"Mafuyu, she d-disappeared again....."

Chiaki could speak no further. She grabbed hold of the legs of the microphone stand, and lowered her head to catch her breath. I could clearly remember the angry expression on Chiaki's face at that time. The scene of the training camp appeared vividly before me. Mafuyu's guitar and Chiaki's drums were perfectly synchronized—just like the arms and legs of one person, or an ingenious canon that went on and on forever.

But despite all that, Mafuyu had disappeared. Without leaving behind a single word.

What's with that? Just what are we to Mafuyu? This isn't how things should end! We've come so far, so how could we end everything like this?

"Hiroshi, I'm really sorry for the wasted trip."

Senpai said that to Hiroshi when she saw him moving the drums on stage.

"It was nothing! But did you guys manage to contact the girl?"

Chiaki and I both shook our heads. After waking up in the morning, I had called Mafuyu at one-hour intervals, not hoping for much, and all I heard were the cold mechanical replies of "Sorry, the number you have just dialed is not reachable."

"Comrade Ebisawa..... may be making her way down here....."

Senpai murmured in a feeble voice, that was almost swallowed up by the noise around us. Is that what she really believes? Why is she not giving up?

"Why are you still insisting on this?"

Upon hearing that question from Hiroshi, Senpai showed a smile that was like the dusk.

"Because feketerigó is a band for the four of us."

I couldn't stare at that smile of hers, so I turned my face away. Chiaki, who was looking at the floor the whole time, slowly raised her head.

Just then, I saw the band logo printed on the chest of Chiaki's T-shirt.

There was a small black silhouette of a bird perched on the "g" of "feketerigó."

"That's....."

Chiaki squeezed a smile and rubbed her eyes when she noticed my gaze.

"I-I made a lot of them. There's one for Nao..... and one for Mafuyu too."

"..... A bird?"

"Eh? Ah, you mean this? Senpai designed it."

So that was indeed the shape of a bird.

Its feathers, from head to tail, were all black—only its beak was yellow. I knew that bird, but I had only seen it in pictures before. It was a bird we shouldn't have been able to find in this country, but I

knew that bird. Why?

I turned my head to look at Senpai. Our eyes met.

"I didn't tell you? It's Hungarian. "fekete" means "black," and "rigó" means bird. Put them together, and you have blackbird."

I couldn't breathe all of a sudden. The sounds in the live house drifted further and further away from me. At the same time, the words Senpai had said back then, and the expression that was on Mafuyu's face—they became clearer and clearer in my mind.

"You like this song?"

Mafuyu nodded in response to that question.

Blackbird. Senpai didn't know, and Chiaki didn't know either. Only Mafuyu and I knew the real significance behind that song—the name of the band decided by Mafuyu; the very first song the both of us played together, back at that misty junkyard at dawn.

feketerigó—

Why did she come up with that name? Why did Mafuyu and I come up with the same name?

"—Young man?"

Senpai's voice pulled me back to the difficult-to-breathe atmosphere of the live house. The voices of the people conversing; the sounds of footsteps and breathing; the clashing of the cymbals; the sounds of the impact of glass; the feedback from the microphones—the sounds around me were the same as the ones before I had sunk myself in my sea of memories, but there was one sound that wasn't there before.

The sound of my heartbeat.

I fumbled for my phone in the back pocket of my jeans, and ran towards the entrance of the live house. I squeezed horizontally through the small opening of the door, and sprinted up the narrow and dark staircase. Despite hearing the sounds of someone chasing behind me, I had no time to stop in my tracks to look back. When I reached the parking lot, I immediately dialed Miss Matsumura's number.

"..... Yes? This is Matsumura speaking."

"Urm, It's Hikawa. There's something..... I'd like to ask you."

Calm down and speak properly—I kept telling myself that.

"There's something I'd like to confirm. Mafuyu..... Mafuyu-san..... did she— "

"Yes?"

"—Did she bring her guitar with her?"

Two seconds of silence followed.

"Please hold on, and do not disconnect the call. I will go confirm that right now."

I prayed hard as I waited for Miss Matsumura's reply. If Mafuyu had brought her guitar with her when she left her house—

"Sorry for making you wait. I did not find Mistress's guitar in her room. I have searched in all the other possible places as well, but I did not see it. She should have taken it with her."

"R-Right!"

My answer sounded like a cough. We were still linked to each other—the melody tying us together was not broken yet. Just as I was about to thank her and end the call, Miss Matsumura continued,

"And also....."

"Eh?"

"We are currently locating the whereabouts of my mistress. The cellphone my mistress possesses is embedded with a GPS tracking device."

"What does that mean?"

"We can pinpoint the location of the phone via satellite."

Ah..... I think I heard something like that before. Oh right, Mafuyu's high-end phone was custom-made for her at the request of her ever-doting father, so it wasn't impossible for him to have activated a service like that.

"Which means..... you already know where she is?"

"No. We began tracing my mistress's location right after we found out she had disappeared. We located her position at three in the

afternoon; however, she seemed to have changed the settings on her phone, and we have not been able to detect any signal from it ever since."

I lowered my head in dejection. She didn't even know how to save the numbers in her phone not too long ago! Damn!

"..... I see. But....."

"But it is better than nothing."

Miss Matsumura then told me what Mafuyu's position was two hours ago. I opened up a map in my mind..... No, can't do. I can't figure out where she is just from this address alone.

"I will contact you if any new developments arise. Please give her a slap in my place if you find our young lady before we do."

"Ah, a-alright. Thank you very much."

I quickly ended the call.

"..... Young man? Is there something—"

I turned my head around. Senpai, who was chasing me earlier, was standing on the stairs leading to the basement. Chiaki was right behind her.

"It seems like Mafuyu brought her guitar along with her."

The expression on Senpai's and Chiaki's faces softened a little when they heard that. Indeed. If she brought her guitar along with her, then there was still a chance. Moreover, she was also carrying her handphone—

Her handphone? Why did she take her handphone with her? For what purpose?

I looked at the phone in my hand. Shit! I'm an idiot for not noticing the calls earlier; they were from Mafuyu as well. The time of the call was—five in the afternoon, which was not too long ago, back when I was still in the basement. Damn! Why did we always miss each other? No, hold on—there was a message in my voice mail. With my trembling fingers, I pressed the button to play the message.

Noise—the noise of the wind, as well as vehicle exhaust? I also heard a loud *garagara* sound. Senpai and Chiaki looked at me uneasily, as the speakers continued to pour out those stuttering

sounds.

"..... It's me. I'm sorry."

It's Mafuyu. It's..... Mafuyu's voice.

"..... I feel really lost. Chiaki said she'd be picking me up, but I had no idea what to do, so I ran away. Because I'm starting to hesitate once again."

She's hesitating. Hesitating about whether to come here? I tightly gripped the phone with my sweaty palms, so as not to miss a single word Mafuyu said.

"But..... I'm sorry. As expected..... I can't go there."

I suppressed my urge to yell with all my might.

"Since I have done such things, I can no longer return to everyone's side..... Even without me by your side, Naomi..... should be okay, right? Since there's Kyouko, and Chiaki....."

What the heck is Mafuyu talking about? Don't give me that crap! Everyone's waiting for her! Without her, everything will not start—why can't she just understand that? Is it because it's something that can't be conveyed with just words alone?

"Moreover..... it's getting harder and harder for me to walk, and my right hand..... can no longer move at all. Even if I go there..... I'll just be a burden to everyone, so..... I'm sorry."

The voice message ended just like that. I could almost shatter my phone with my grip. Chiaki was looking at me from the side with a frightened expression.

Your right hand can no longer move? So she can't play the guitar even if she's here? I originally thought Mafuyu would definitely understand if we played together on the same stage, but she can't play the guitar?

"Nao, are you alright? Was that..... from Mafuyu?"

I my lip hard and nodded my head.

"What did she say?"

"She said she can't come. That her right hand is unable to move right now, and that she'd only be a burden to us if she were here."

Even I felt like crying when I saw Chiaki becoming more and more

depressed. What's with all this? Why? Why have things turned out like this?

"..... And so? What are you planning to do, young man?"

I raised my head and saw Senpai put on a silent expression that looked like the aftermath of a downpour.

"What else? I'm going to find Mafuyu, of course!"

I might not be able to find her, and I might not be able to make it to the performance, but those things didn't matter to me at all. We are the blackbird, and Mafuyu was the right wing. In order to fly, we'd definitely have to find her—regardless of whether she could play the guitar or not.

I played Mafuyu's voice message over and over in an attempt to sift out the clues hidden among the noise behind her voice. The clues should be able to lead me to Mafuyu. I must find her, and then—

Then what? For the things that can't be conveyed through words, what could I use instead, to link them together once more? What must I do to once again find the thing that links us together?

The thing that connected us—

Music.

Something clicked in my mind. I recalled what I had heard earlier. There was other noise, aside from Mafuyu's painful words, that had attracted my attention—right, it was music. The canon of the bells ringing from a place far, far away.

Dvořák.

"..... Nao? What's wrong?"

I shifted my gaze from Chiaki's face to Senpai.

"Senpai..... you said before that you'd help me as long as I asked?"

Senpai nodded with a light smile on her face—as though she was saying "I've been waiting for that line for a long time".

"But..... I think it'll be a really unreasonable request....."

"I'll be the judge of that—not you, young man."

Yeah. There's such an impressive person next to me, so why didn't

I ask for her help earlier? When she was done listening to what I had in mind, the expression on her face remained unchanged. She just grabbed my hand and looked at my watch.

"We have less than two hours left. I can't make a trip back home."

"S-So you can't do it—?"

"Anything is fine as long as it's by The Eagles?"

I nodded my head repeatedly after dazing out for a second. That means she's willing to help? But can it really be done? I asked myself that, and thought it was really just—

Senpai swung her hair and ran off. Not long after, she disappeared into the depths of the parking lot. Next, I heard the sounds of an engine fade away in the blink of an eye. She's just too quick with her movements.

"What's going on? What was that just now? Where did Senpai go?"

"Sorry Chiaki, but there's no time to explain right now." I placed both my hands on her shoulders and continued, "We might not have time to rehearse, so we'll have to leave all the preparation work in your hands..... Sorry, but can you stay here and do that?"

Chiaki opened her teary eyes wide, then said,

"..... You're going to find Mafuyu?"

"Mmm. I don't know if I'll make it in time, but I'll definitely bring her back."

"I got it."

Chiaki nodded.

"You must definitely find Mafuyu. I have lots of things I want to scold her about."

I nodded in return.

I counted out the things that had to be done. Can I really find Mafuyu using this method? I didn't know. But I couldn't think of anything else, so I could only try. We had just under two hours till our performance—I raised my head to look at the cloud-filled sky.

I must definitely find her—I must find Mafuyu, who exists under the

same sky as me.

Chapter 10 - Kiss it Goodbye

I returned to the basement and sprinted past the staff, towards the PA console. I then asked Hiroshi, who was standing to the side, "Sorry, but can I ask a favor of you?"

When Hiroshi was finished listening to my request, his face displayed an expression of "Huh?" However, the person in charge of the audio system—who wore a bandanna on his head—seemed to have immediately understood what I wanted. He rapped on the equipment and asked,

"So all you need is the time difference between the sounds?"

"Urm, yes. If possible..... be as accurate as you can."

"Pass me the source. I'll take a look."

"Oi, hold on! I'm at a loss here!"

"It doesn't matter if you don't get it!"

The guy grabbed my phone and swiftly recorded Mafuyu's message.

"—Oh? This is quite an embarrassing confession we have here..... Hey lad, it's not good to make a girl cry."

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

I totally forgot—I had actually allowed a stranger to listen to Mafuyu's painful words. But then, now's not the time to be thinking about something like that. Hiroshi grabbed me by the hand just as I was about to rush towards the exit.

"Oi! Where do you think you're going? You still haven't had your rehearsal yet. Also, why has Kyouko disappeared as well?"

"I'm going to find Mafuyu right now! Hurry up and let me go!"

"You know where she is?"

"I'm currently calculating her position. Lad, hurry up and move! You still have to get a map, right?" The bandanna guy interrupted.

"I'm really sorry! I'll definitely be back before the concert begins!"

I briefly exchanged sights with Chiaki, who was at the drum set, then flew towards the door. Thank god Furukawa's in the resting area. He would definitely fly into a rage if he knew we were pinning our hopes on something as silly as this.

However, we had no other options besides this. All of this may be for nothing, and we may not be able to recover the wing that's been torn off—but even so, we couldn't just succumb ourselves to that fate without doing anything.



I pedaled as hard as I could on my bicycle, making my way to the neighboring town—the train station closest to my house was there. I stormed into the stationary store to obtain a long ruler, a compass, and the largest map I could find. I glanced at the clock in the store before I left—it was already five forty-five. The summer dusk was slowly being swallowed up by time. And next is—hmm..... should be the district office. Wait, why the district office again!? I couldn't help but recall the time Mafuyu and I had run away from home together. The plan I had come up with back then was pretty stupid. I took my phone out and used it to connect to the district office's website.

..... Hold on. Which number should I call? I stopped pedaling and parked my bicycle on the walkway next to the railways. I was at a loss at what to do. Come to think of it, I don't even know what to call that thing they play every evening at five!

There wasn't much time left, and I would've only wasted more time if I continued to panic and not do anything. I dialed the number of the district office.

"Urm, good evening, I'd like to inquire about something. It's about Dvořák's music..... the song that plays every day at five in the evening....."

When I recalled the situation much later, I realized it was really stupid of me to ask that question in that way. I must've really confused the general division operator. Dvořák's music..... who would've understood that?

My call was transferred a few times to various divisions, before finally reaching civil defense.

"You mean that music? That's the radio broadcast for disaster prevention!"

It seemed the person on the other side of the phone was an old civil servant.

"If something like an earthquake or fire occurred, we'd play an emergency broadcast via those speakers! The thing that rings at five every day isn't a chime, but a test broadcast."

Eh? So that's the reason behind that? I never knew.....

"Uhh..... urm, then..... may I know where those speakers are situated in the city?"

My heart nearly sank to the floor when I heard his reply.

"Where huh.....? In over forty different locations?"

"Forty....."

I was close to fainting, but I managed to continue.

"Can you please tell me..... the location of all the speakers?"



All the fire stations in the city, nearly all the public schools, and the parks also. I spread the map out on the divider on the roadside, then marked all the speaker locations the civil servant had told me. I was getting irritated about halfway through the task. I never thought there'd be so many. Damn, it's almost six o'clock.

Just then, my phone rang.

"Nao? It's me. The mister at the PA finished crunching the numbers and asked me to inform you about it."

"But why you—" Damn, I'm stupid. There's no other way he could contact me aside from Chiaki! It was my fault for not leaving my phone number behind before I left in a hurry. After I finished writing down the three numbers on the side of the map, Chiaki asked,

"Right, what are these numbers for? Is there really a way for us to locate Mafuyu? It's already so late—"

"I don't know, but....."

I took out my compass. Indeed, there isn't much time left. As I

gathered my thoughts, I clamped my phone between my ear and my shoulder and explained,

"At the current temperature, the speed of sound in the air is about 348 meters per second."

"..... What?"

"In the voice message, after Mafuyu's voice faded away, I could hear the sound of the chimes. Those chimes ring every day at five."

I forgot when it was, but I had listened to Dvořák with Mafuyu before—the canon of the second movement of <New World Symphony> that traveled at the absolute limit of the speed of sound. I was really thankful of Ebichiri's habit of overly doting on his daughter—an ordinary phone would definitely not be able to pick up the broadcasts in the city that clearly. I had that high-end phone to thank for that.

"All the speakers in the city broadcast at the exact same time, so that means the sound from the more distant speakers will take longer to reach you, right? All I need to do is measure the time lag between the chimes, then multiply it by the speed of sound, or 348 meters per second. That'll allow me to figure out roughly how far Mafuyu is from the speakers. There were three separate chimes in the voice message that arrived at different times, so—"

"Y-You can figure out where she is just from that alone? But the time between each chime is so short..... a-and..... there should be a lot of speakers as well, right?"

"Mmm. So all that's left is for me to believe in Mafuyu."

Using the compass, I drew circle after circle on the map. Of course there were huge margins of error, as my calculations were based on estimated time differences, as well as the speed of sound. I wasn't so lucky as to obtain a precise spot on the map where three circles overlapped, but even so, there was still a ray of hope—the intersection between those circles and that line.

"..... Believe in her?"

"Because she brought her guitar with her and said she was at a loss at whether to meet us or not."

In addition to that, there was also Mafuyu's last detected location

Miss Matsumura had told me.

"But what's the point in knowing that? The information's already two hours old!"

"So what I'm saying is—I'm assuming she headed directly towards the live house right after running away from home."

There was no other option but for me to believe in that.

Starting from Mafuyu's house, I used my finger to trace out a route along the national highway, moving north. Mafuyu's last detected position happened to be in that direction as well.

My finger stopped when it hit one of the circles I had drawn. Next to my finger was a blue line that traversed the map horizontally—it was a river.

Is that where Mafuyu's at? If she was planning to make her way to the neighboring city following that path, it made sense for her to walk north all the way to the river, then continue along the riverbed, which would lead her north-east—

That's right. Regardless of how good the receivers on her phone are, in order to transmit the sound of the chimes that clearly, she'd have to be in a place where there were no objects to block the path of the sound, right?

Everything made sense if she was at the riverside.

I hung up on Chiaki and replayed Mafuyu's voice message. Could I hear the sound of water, to confirm my hypothesis? Sadly, the sounds picked up by the receiver were too faint for me to make much of them, so everything boiled down to luck. In any case, what I hypothesized was something that had happened over one hour ago. She might've become tired from all the walking, and stopped at some place to rest. Or, she might still be making her way to the live house.

My only option was to believe the latter.

After stuffing the map and my phone into my pocket, I released the kickstand on my bicycle to prepare to continue my search.



As I rode along the narrow road with no sidewalks, I was constantly overtaken by cars that sped past me. By then, the dark clouds in the sky had slowly dispersed, allowing the setting summer sun to peek diagonally down at me. The sun in the west was bright red, just like the color of blood.

I was already sweating all over when I saw the dikes of the river. I pushed my bicycle up the slope and swallowed huge gulps of the air that blew against my face.

At the bottom of the grassy slope was a river that seemed to stretch on endlessly. The river was narrower than usual, due to the hot weather, and was dyed in the colors of the sunset. I took my map out and confirmed I was heading upstream. The problem is..... will I really be able to find her? On the map, the overlap of the three circles was nothing more than just a triangle a few centimeters wide, but in reality, that area was extremely large. I could easily see people lying on the riverside, people walking their dogs, and others practicing badminton. Upon seeing all that, I couldn't help but think—wouldn't it be great if the world disappeared into the dusk, leaving behind only Mafuyu and me.

If that were the case, I'd definitely be able to find her.

The sweat on my body was gradually drying off, and the wind was beginning to feel a little chilly. My left hand still held on to the map, and my legs had never once stopped pedaling.

There weren't many significant landmarks along the riverside, only the metalworks factory located right below the dikes. I was about to reach the area of the triangle outlined on the map, but the river before me suddenly became wider. I was forced to take a detour, as I was riding along the riverbank. As I followed the large turn, I passed a baseball diamond and a football field to my left.

When I cycled through the turn and got back to the riverside, I stopped my bicycle in a place filled with grass. As I looked at the riverbank filled with pebbles, I was suddenly overcome with a surge of fatigue. I sat down on the grassy slope.

It should be somewhere around here, right? My mind was made blank by the winds blowing past me, and the heat from my body—a result of the vigorous motions I was going through earlier—was

instantly absorbed by the cool grass beneath me.

I only had an hour left. Seems like I won't be able to find her. The real world was hopelessly large, while I was so insignificantly tiny—I felt like crying. When the bond between two people disappears, they won't be able to meet each other again. All that was left was the darkness of the night, silently, but surely, creeping up on me.

It will no longer return—the thing that tied Mafuyu and me together will never return to me again.

I took my phone out and confirmed the time of the voice message. It's already too late for me to do anything, but I should at least give Mafuyu a call one more time. But all I heard was the hollow sound of the dial tone landing on the grass, drip by drip. I buried my face between my knees in depression—the hand I was holding the phone with dropped to the ground. As I counted the number of rings, it felt as though the dial tone were repeatedly slicing my arm with each ring.

The thing that had once bonded Mafuyu and me together—

Music.

Music—I heard it.

I raised my head slowly, and for a moment, I thought it was just a hallucination. I listened intently to the wind that breezed past the surface of the river, and ignored the inanimate electronic sound endlessly ringing from my palm. I began to seek out the faint sound.

There really was the sound of music—I could really hear it. I slid down the grassy slope and stood on the exposed soil on the riverbank. I closed my eyes and listened intently to the sounds of a guitar. The constant G open chords sounded just like the heartbeats of a bird, and the melody riding on those chords, was like the eye of the bird, looking through the darkness of the night.

I had heard that song before. It was the first song that tied the two of us together.

<Blackbird>.

I began to sprint wildly across the soil—before the song stops playing, and before the sun sets. I ran onto the grassy patch and traveled against the flow of the music, seeking out its source. As I

searched, I pried open countless Canada goldenrod flowers, and even stepped on some of their stems.

My view suddenly widened when I reached the end of the patch of weeds. The river had already chewed up the afterglow of the setting sun, and was washing it away silently. The night winds gently flowed through my hair. I looked around in an attempt to find that song. The light gradually disappeared, and everything around me sunk into the deep blue hue of the night.

Just then, a flash of light streaked past the corners of my eyes.

It came from a place upstream, far away from me—on a dune formed from the alluvium of the river. There, a bunch of maroon hair glittered brightly with a gold brilliance under the last remaining rays of the setting sun.

I kicked aside the gravel next to my feet and rushed upstream.

"—Mafuyu!"

The person squatting on the ground, staring at the surface of the river, suddenly raised her head when she heard my voice—it's Mafuyu alright. The shadow of her guitar case stretched really far upstream. She was holding on to her handphone tightly with her hand—her phone was playing a polyphonic <Blackbird> ringtone.

"..... Why?"

Mafuyu's eyes opened wide due to her surprise. She mumbled as she stared at me sprinting towards her.

"Why..... are you here?"

I swallowed my saliva as I attempted to catch my breath. With my back hunched over and my hands on my knees, I replied,

"..... Why else!? To find you, of course!"

Tears appeared in Mafuyu's reddish eyes.

"..... Why are you looking for me? You idiot!"

I didn't know if I should've been angry or dumbfounded, or if I should've just laughed instead. In the end, I stretched my hand out to her.

"..... Let's go! Everyone's waiting for you..... We'll be going on

stage at seven."

Mafuyu hugged her knees and shook her head fervently.

"I can't go."

"Why!?"

"Because..... I had gone off and disappeared, so I no longer have the right to go back. Everyone would just be troubled if I was around, right?"

I lifted my head up to look at the sky that was slowly being dyed in the colors of the night. It won't do for me to convey my feelings with just words alone. But even so—

I grabbed Mafuyu's right hand, whose fingers Mafuyu had buried in the sand. Mafuyu looked up in surprise.

"How would you feel if your right hand were to say that to you as well?"

"Wh.....at?"

"We would feel really troubled if you weren't around! It's that simple. If you don't return to us, we won't be able to play any songs at all."

"But..... my hand is currently....."

"That doesn't matter! Can you stand? Here, hold on to my shoulder."

"W-Wait!"

I propped Mafuyu up forcibly.

"If you can't play using your hand, then use your teeth to play! If you can't do that either, then get on the stage and dance! We're a band! And think about who gave the band its name!"

"Don't decide that by yourself!" Mafuyu's eyes were about to sink to the bottom of the sea. "Even if..... even if I'm around, there's nothing I can do! I can't even play the guitar—"

"Things like that don't matter at all! Even if you can't play the guitar now, there's still the piano!"

I grabbed Mafuyu tightly by her right wrist.

"What are you talking about?"

"It won't do if Mafuyu's not around! Don't you get it!?"

"I don't!"

Mafuyu's tears fell towards the ground along with her words.

"Didn't I promise you before our training camp? I gambled my whole life on that, you know? That's why I said things like 'I'll listen to anything you say if you can't find it.' You also agreed to it back then, right? If that's the case, then don't run away!"

I had no idea what I was saying.

"And I promise you, you'll definitely find it this time, at the live house. It's okay even if you can't play the guitar. Just stand at the side of the stage and listen to us play. If you still don't get it after that, then I'll be at your beck and call—I don't care if you want me to grab a hat and collect money for you for the rest of my life. So—"

Just then, I remembered what Miss Maki had said to me before. Why do I feel so troubled when Mafuyu's not around? It's because I —

"Actually..... I had planned to live out the three years of my high school life not participating in any clubs, just spending my days listening to CDs. But because Mafuyu appeared..... because I hoped to keep you by my side, I purchased my bass, modified it and practiced. But you—you're always like this. Don't just disappear like that!"

It was because Mafuyu had appeared, and because I had hoped to keep her by my side. I had already gone so far and done all those things. However, the words in my mouth were swallowed up by the burning breath in my throat.

Mafuyu walked up to me with unsteady steps and grabbed my shoulders. She lifted her head and looked at me with her shimmering eyes, then shifted her gaze to someplace around my upper arm. She said with a hoarse voice,

"..... Idiot. You're an idiot!"

"Just let me be one! Can you walk?"

Even though her gaze was still fixed on my arms, she nodded her

head.



We cycled upstream along the bicycle trail. I could feel Mafuyu's body heat on my back, and both her arms were wrapped around my waist. The pedals were getting heavier and heavier, and the sky darker, with each passing distance. The throbbing from just then had not totally died down yet. I dared not look at the time at all. Gripping the handlebars tightly, I looked at the arms wrapped around my waist from time to time, to make sure Mafuyu was still by my side.

Mafuyu's right here; and now, I'm bringing her there.

But that's all there is to it—she's only "here," just like her right fingers. It was only a physical presence. The blood being pumped couldn't reach her, so she couldn't move.

I can't let things end like this. I can't consider this a band. If so—

Senpai and I—can we make it in time?

I didn't know. All I knew was that I could feel her breath blowing on my ears. I firmly gripped the handlebars again, which were wet from my sweat, and transferred more strength into my feet.

The sky was totally dark when we reached Bright. The windows on the first floor, as well as the entrance of the staircase leading to the basement, were lit up with bright neon lights. The place was particularly eye-catching compared to the surrounding quiet, and relatively dark, residential area. There were some people hanging out around the neon lights—they should be attendees waiting for the performance to begin? I parked my bicycle in the corner of the parking lot packed with cars, then glanced at the clock in the office. It was already seven ten. We didn't make it in time. Has the concert already begun?

"Are your legs okay?"

"I-I can walk," Mafuyu leapt off the backseat and stood on the gravel ground.

We walked past the attendees that had gathered there. Just as we were about to head down the stairs, Mafuyu suddenly stopped in her tracks and began to hesitate again. I grabbed her by the hands.

"Quickly!"

"But..... It's already....."

Already what!? Chiaki's still waiting for us! I told her I'd definitely bring Mafuyu back. I briskly walked down the stairs. There was a small table situated at the turn, where staff members were selling tickets for the concert. "Ah! The two of you.....!" One of the staff called out to us, so I shouted, "We're one of the performers!" I then pulled Mafuyu by her hands and continued running downwards.

When I pushed open the heavy soundproof door located at the end of the flight of stairs, a series of blinding and scattered rays, as well as an intense bout of a penetrative rhythm, came lunging at me.

When we stepped inside, Mafuyu and I were immediately cut off from the outside world by the door behind us. I could see the audience moving to the rhythm amid the dense hot air around us. There's probably about a hundred people here..... no, maybe more? The person in front of the crowd, bathed in the colorful spotlights and going all out while drenched in sweat was—

"..... Chiaki?"

It took a lot of effort to hear Mafuyu's whisper. Right, that person is Chiaki. The dancing white drumsticks were etching out beautiful and cruel arcs in the air, just like a whip. I could faintly see Chiaki's burning face amid the gold and white shimmers of the golden cymbals. Beneath the constant shuffles of the light cymbals was the rhythm of the bass drum, which seemed to make its way right into our hearts, and even up our throats.

And then—

Chiaki saw me.

No, she's not looking at me. Somehow, I clearly knew—

She was looking at Mafuyu.

The beats suddenly changed. A provoking rhythm with semiquavers that climbed up the scales in a flash, before diving all the way down, poured from Chiaki's drums. That caused a stir among the audience, who itched for more.

"That's....." Mafuyu's voice was a little hoarse.

I too, knew what it was. <He Man Woman Hater>—the song Mafuyu and Chiaki had used to duel each other for over ten minutes, with so much intensity that it had felt like they were slashing away at each other. Mafuyu was grabbing onto my arm with her left hand; it seemed to be twitching. She was searching for the nonexistent set of six strings, to answer Chiaki's call.

"Let's go. Chiaki's calling us."

We walked along the wall of the live house and brushed against the backs of the crowd as we made our way towards the stage. We walked into the resting area after locating the door leading to it; though it was called a resting area, it was nothing more than a passage that led to the emergency exit, with a few cabinets placed along the way. We saw a few guys already changed into their attire; they were standing shoulder to shoulder, and were ready to take the stage at any moment. Right when he saw me, Furukawa grabbed me by the shoulder and slammed me against the wall.

"Oi! Taisei!" Hiroshi was about to stop him, but Furukawa brushed his arms away. Furukawa grabbed my collar and pulled me close. The back of my head hurt from the impact against the wall, but somehow, his voice seemed especially piercing.

"Quit fooling around, you bastard! What time do you think it is now?"

"..... Sorry....."

"Why the heck are you apologizing to me? You should be apologizing to your drummer instead! She's been holding on this entire time with her solo performance!"

I looked at the stage, bombarded by the merciless rays of the spotlights, from my position at the side. Chiaki—she stirred up the atmosphere of the place by constantly moving her arms, as though they were about to snap off. By herself.

Chiaki did it all alone.

"Urm, may I know..... where Kagurazaka-senpai is?"

"That's what I wanna know! Where did she run off to?"

She's not here—that means Senpai didn't manage to make it in time? The piercing tones of the open rimshot came from the stage,

and the descending sounds of the bass drum were slowly fading away. The final note of the drum performance was buried by the cheers of the audience below. In response to the cheers, Chiaki twirled her drumsticks in her hands and stood up, wobbling a little. As though there were an invisible string leashed around her neck, she walked to the side of the stage unsteadily, and collapsed into my chest.

"..... Nao, you're—so—slow—"

"..... Sorry....."

"And I want to scold Mafuyu a lot!" Despite her leaning limply against my chest, Chiaki shot a fierce glare at Mafuyu. Mafuyu shrunk herself to the side and removed the guitar case on her shoulder.

"In any case, let me have a drink first!"

Chiaki accepted the bottle of water Hiroshi offered, and finished it in a flash. The flush on her face had nowhere near receded, but she was already anxiously looking back at the stage.

"What are you planning to do?"

"Hold on till Senpai returns, of course!"

"Just give up already!" Furukawa said that from beside me. "You managed to stir up the audience with your solo performance. You've done all you can already."

"I don't want to!" Chiaki rejected him immediately. "Mafuyu, go prepare yourself too, quickly! Senpai will definitely make it back here."

I shook my head. Chiaki had no idea how demanding my request was. Mafuyu lowered her head and stared at her right hand.

"Forget it, I get it. I'll go back on stage by myself. Stupid Mafuyu!"

"Oi! Chiaki!"

I chased Chiaki and ran onto the stage. A wave of cheers from the audience assaulted us immediately. I took a look at the area below the stage, and all I could see was a sea of people whose faces I couldn't see properly because of the stage lights. I felt goosebumps on my body—Chiaki..... she had been fighting alone this whole time

in a place like this?

I could faintly hear the yells of Furukawa or some other person from behind me, but it was already too late. I was standing on the stage, looking at over one hundred people beneath me. Their blood vessels had already been infused with the drugs Chiaki administered. In the place before me—on the stage to the audience's right—was my Aria Pro II bass, sitting on a stand, waiting for me.

I could no longer turn back. Something had been injected into my blood vessels as well—I was burning up. The instant I touched the neck of my bass, I felt a sweet surge of electricity flowing into me. Despite my legs trembling from nervousness, my mind was in a surprisingly clear state. What should we do? Senpai's not here yet, and Mafuyu's still stiffly standing behind me..... if only one of them would take the stage. I couldn't do anything alone—I had already exhausted myself bringing Mafuyu here.

"..... Nao, wait..... I'm sorry....."

Chiaki stuck her head out from behind the drums and said to me in a hoarse voice,

"My legs feels weak. I probably played too hard just now..... Please give me a moment, as I can't step on the pedals right now. Ahaha, what a problem we have here."

I looked at Chiaki's slumped thighs in despair. I began to hear the boos from the crowd below.

"Sorry, I have to rest a little longer." Chiaki's voice sounded like it was close to tears. Chiaki had been fighting by herself on the stage, but what about me? Could I do that as well? But I couldn't. I could only carry my bass and do nothing, with my back facing the audience. This was a situation I couldn't have faced alone in the first place. I looked to the side of the stage. Mafuyu was squatting next to the wall, looking at me with a painful expression on her face, while Furukawa and Hiroshi were discussing something behind her. It seemed Hiroshi had finally given in. He lifted both his arms above his head—and both of them took their guitars out of their cases.

Ah. Is this where everything will end?

After many difficulties, I had finally brought Mafuyu here, but it was already too late. When I realized it; when I ran out of this place; when I looked for her; when we returned together—everything was already too late.

Just then—

There was a change in the atmosphere of the live house.

My ears had picked up the slight change—there was a brief gush of wind, followed by a strength that supported me, who was on the brink of collapsing.

I steadied myself and turned to face the audience. Behind the staggering crowd was the opened soundproof door. The person standing there had her long black hair tied up in a braid; it was fluttering along with the escaping hot air—just like the tail feathers of a bird.

A few of the attendees close to the door had noticed and turned their heads around. The silhouette swung her arms and tossed something out. I barely caught the glittering object that soared through the darkness above the crowd. The sharp sound of rubber squeaked through the microphones. The audience died down in an instant, and a moment of silence fell upon us.

"..... What's this?" "What just happened?" "Who's that?" "Eh? What?"

Small ripples began to form. However, I was only looking at the thing in my hand—a tape with the title of a song clearly labelled on it.

I see, it's this song!

Somehow, it felt like Senpai had known everything right from the start.

"..... Senpai?" Chiaki whispered. I put the tape in Mafuyu's tape recorder, which hung right beneath the microphone. The moment I pressed play, the cheers of the audience rang out once again. The crowd split in two, and that person began making her way grandly to the stage bathed in colorful lights.

Senpai looked at me, Chiaki, and finally, Mafuyu. She then put on a gentle smile.

Just then, the melody of the piano began to play.

The spinning tape recorder played out the crisp chords of the piano, while the microphone, with its head lowered, gently picked up the sounds being released. I immediately knew what was going on here, so Mafuyu should've known too.

Even though it was broken up into segments by Kagurazaka-senpai, and pieced together to form another song, I still recognized it immediately upon hearing it—it was the sound of Mafuyu's piano.

Senpai allowed the melody of the piano to continue flowing, with her back still facing the audience. At the same time, she said to everyone with a low but clear voice—

"Not all of our members are here yet."

Chiaki tilted her head in confusion. As for Mafuyu, she had raised her head in shock and was looking at Senpai.

Indeed, not all the members of feketerigó are here yet. Even though Mafuyu's here physically, her soul isn't here.

Therefore—

"As usual, let's start by warming up with some songs by The Eagles, until everyone's here!"

Upon seeing the energy return to Chiaki's eyes, Senpai turned around and grabbed the microphone. I gently laid the chords of my bass on the crisp sounds of Mafuyu's piano.

Next, Senpai's voice joined the fray—

<The Last Resort>

It was the hoarse singing voice of a traveler who had traveled the seas with only his body and his life.

<The Last Resort> is the last track in The Eagle's <Hotel California> album. It's a requiem dedicated to the Native Americans, whose homeland was plundered, sullied and destroyed. It's a slow and sad song. Actually, the melody carrying the song right now was put together using segments plucked from Beethoven's piano sonata—though I wonder how many people here actually figured that out?

It was probably only the few of us here. Piano Sonata No. 30 in E major—what was being played were the variations of the final

movement: **<Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung>**, a title written by Beethoven in German.^[1]

How long did it take for Senpai to create something like this? She had obtained the source of the music from Mafuyu's CD, arranged the different segments together without changing the tempo of the individual pieces, and changed it into a song sung by The Eagles. That was indeed what I had asked her to do. It might've sounded easy on paper, but she had actually done it for me.

And that was the reason Mafuyu was here right now.

Even though it was just a series of notes connected together and spewed out from the shabby tape recorder hanging off the microphone stand, Senpai, Chiaki and I had all found Mafuyu in there.

Mafuyu should've found it too, right? The place she was in our hearts. She wasn't playing anything, and was only listening from afar, but that should've been even more reason for her to understand—to understand her reason for being here.

The hard sound of the cymbals gradually faded away as we entered the second chorus; Chiaki's drums came in right after. The color of the silently swaying audience was exactly like that of the sea that existed in Mafuyu's eyes. The sound of Mafuyu's piano headed straight into that sea. The sextuplets of the fourth variation wobbled along with the waves. When the vocal section of the song was over, Senpai used her Les Paul guitar to engage in a lengthy exchange with Mafuyu's piano. Her guitar became entwined with the piano, and with that, we entered the sixth variation.

However, my steps stopped right there.

The melody of Mafuyu's piano was about to come to an end, but **<The Last Resort>** was far from over. When the scale changed into G major, the requiem of the Indians became our elegy—

I began to pray. Finally, Mafuyu's piano reached its end, and what was left was the melody of my bass, as well as the sound of Senpai's guitar, as it mimicked the cries of the seagulls. Mafuyu had disappeared. A void opened up in our sound.

Senpai's singing sounded like a prayer too—filled with overflowing

hope, which gave her a reason to bleed. *In the name of destiny and the name of God.* What a helpless and cruel line it was. And thus, everyone left her—Senpai's singing echoed in nothingness.

However—

Suddenly, I noticed it. There was someone there. On the other side of Senpai's melody, and above Chiaki's tempo, entering in slowly—the sound was right next to me. The melody sounded way too natural, as though the melody had branched off from my bass, and extended endlessly into the sky. It gently encased itself around the sound of Senpai's Les Paul guitar. As I breathed the accompaniment of the chorus into the mike, I narrowed my eyes and looked towards the other side of the stage.

Behind Senpai's tall silhouette, I saw a golden shimmer. The maroon hair glittered under the dazzling stage lights.



For a moment, I wondered if that was just a hallucination of mine. I mean, my ears had always heard things that weren't there. But thankfully, it wasn't an illusion at all. Senpai sang out the final

prayers. It was a song for those who had plundered the homeland of others, portraying the helplessness of those who had their homeland stolen from them.

—*They call it paradise*
I don't know why—
—*You call someplace paradise,*
kiss it goodbye—

As though Senpai's melodious voice had been sucked into darkness, all that was left were the sounds of the guitars constantly streaming out. One of the guitars sketched out the finale of the song, while the melody of the other flew away into the faraway skies.

I took another look at the other side of the stage. It really wasn't my hallucination—Mafuyu was right there, plucking the strings of her Stratocaster with her slender, fair and mirage-like right hand. The cymbals behind her clashed, and the sea of people beneath us erupted into a roar.



I could hardly remember what happened after that.

The clash between Mafuyu's and Senpai's guitar solos continued on for five minutes, and might've gone on longer if I hadn't stopped them. There was no time for us to rest after we finished <The Last Resort>. The audience below us was already impatiently urging us on by stomping on the floor.

We didn't talk much on stage, as each and every second up there was precious to us. The many things that had slowly gathered in us over the last two months, were hurled beneath the stage in one go, in thirty minutes. Some of the audience might've drowned from that.

When we were done digesting all our songs, we were cheered as we walked off the stage. Our bodies were drenched in sweat. Chiaki could no longer stand, so thank god Senpai got to her before she fell on the floor.

Hiroshi and his band members, and the other band that consisted of middle-aged members, all had smiles on their faces. The only person with a grumpy expression was none other than Furukawa.

However, that grumpy person then spoke.

"Oi. You guys are the opening act, but for some reason, some people down there are demanding an encore."

He pointed at the stage rather unwillingly—it's just as he said! The rhythmic sounds of clapping and stomping from the audience reached us, and it sounded as though the ground was rumbling. I had already planned to succumb myself to the rather comfortable fatigue, so I showed an apologetic smile and replied,

"Urm..... but the amount of time for the concert is limited....."

"Quit complaining! Get on the stage now, or else the building will collapse on us."

Furukawa kicked me in the back. It seemed like the staff had no intention of moving the instruments on the stage either; they all just looked in our direction. I guess we have no choice but to comply.

I then shot a glance at Senpai. She had allowed the exhausted Chiaki to sit on her thighs, so she said to me,

"Looks like we'll have to allow Comrade Chiaki to rest. You two can take the stage!"

Us two..... both of us? That means—

I looked at Mafuyu. There was a red hue to her fair skin, and the color of her eyes was the same as the color of the summer sky.

"See, this is the name of our band!"

Senpai patted Chiaki's chest. The logo of feketerigó was printed there on her T-shirt.

"So there can only be one song for our encore."

Mafuyu had already nodded her head in agreement before I could react. She stepped onstage without any hint of hesitation. The orderly sounds of clapping and stomping then shattered into waves of applause. It was when I saw Mafuyu carrying her guitar on her shoulder without fear, that I realized—despite the difference in genre, Mafuyu was still a professional musician, so she was already used to all these things.

The only problem was, that didn't apply to me. As I was hesitating, Mafuyu briefly looked me in the eyes. She then used her thumb and

index finger to play that song—<Blackbird>.

With that, I was forced to go onstage as well.

The spotlights and Mafuyu's face were all so dazzling—I didn't pay any attention to whether I had sung well or not.

Notes

1. which I think translates roughly as "Cantabile with Heartfelt Emotion" or something. I can't into German.

Chapter 11 - Rainbow

I remembered Hiroshi had once talked about how he sometimes swapped roles with Furukawa, to form a joke band focused on laughing at how bad the other was. But after hearing them in person from the resting area, I couldn't help but tsukkomi them in my mind—in no way was that bad at all!

I actually preferred Furukawa's vocals. According to the information Chiaki gave me, Furukawa's professional accompaniment to his vocals was one of the reasons Melancholy Chameleon's concerts were so spectacular.

Speaking of which, the thing that depressed me the most was the main act—the band of four middle-aged guys. The band consisted of a piano trio and a guitar. During their self-introduction backstage, I found out their band was made up of an elementary school teacher, a guy who ran a confectionery shop, a construction worker, and another person. My initial impression of them as "just an amateur band" was shattered in an instant, right at the beginning of their very first song. Despite them being so incredibly good, they actually only play in their spare time?

"It'd be really depressing to listen to those old guys when your new singles weren't selling well."

Hiroshi whispered to me jokingly.

So that's the reason they were the main act instead of your band, which consisted of two professional musicians? So you guys were actually just the appetizers?

"But we don't call them old guys for nothing. They're impressive when they start out, but they tire out as they go on. It's quite interesting, so look forward to it!"

Well, it was really funny watching the latter part of their performance crumble into a mess, when the middle-aged guys started gulping iced vodka while still on stage.



The celebration party for the performance wasn't held at a pub, probably because they took into consideration we were only in high school. Instead, we went to a Chinese restaurant. The second floor was filled with over twenty people, though some of those customers were unrelated to our group. The whole situation was a mess, and was made worse by the middle-aged guys, who had already drunk some alcohol before even coming here. The tatami room had cushions and short tables, which made it feel more like a hotel rather than a Chinese restaurant. And as a result, we relaxed ourselves a little too much. Some of the people even placed a few cushions together to lie on top of.

Prior to the start of the celebration, Hiroshi and the other three members of his band started playing rock-paper-scissors all of a sudden. It seemed they were deciding who would be the one to drive, as the unlucky driver wouldn't be able to drink. The final duel was between Furukawa and Hiroshi, and the defeated Furukawa was visibly pissed.

However, Chiaki and Senpai chose to completely ignore Furukawa. With the laws of Japan totally erased from their minds, they began binging on wine. Oi, someone stop them immediately!

"Senpai, when did you start drinking?"

I asked her meekly, as I watched her drinking cup after cup of Shaoxing rice wine.

"It is said that back in olden Europe, parents would feed their babies gin if they cried in the middle of the night!"

..... Why are you telling me such scary trivial knowledge!?

"Hey, Kyouko....." Hiroshi, who was sitting beside Kyouko, said while drinking, "It has always been my dream to marry a girl who's younger than me—and who holds her liquor better than me—and have her take care of me for the rest of my life."

"I'm sorry, but I have my sweethearts already. There are about three of them."

I had no idea which of her words were true, and which were fake.

"Speaking of which.....!"

Chiaki, who was sitting next to Senpai as well, was originally

competing with the middle-aged guys at drinking, but she suddenly placed her glass down with a "hic!" and stood up.

"It seems like everyone's no longer pushing the issue, but I still say Mafuyu's actions today were unforgivable!"

Mafuyu, who was slowly eating her salad next to me, flinched at that sudden statement.

"That's right! She was this close to betraying her comrades. That's quite a heavy offense!"

Senpai knelt on one of her knees, and put on a sinister smile on her face.

"S-Sorry!"

"There'd be no need for the Special Investigation Team if an apology was all that was needed to solve everything!"

Chiaki said that before slamming her hands on the table. Mafuyu hid herself behind my back in fear. Even though the middle-aged guys had no idea what was going on, they joined in on the fun with "Yeah, pay with your body!"

"I heard Comrade Ebisawa had no idea how important she was in our hearts?"

"B-But I....."

They were obviously bullying her. But I'd definitely be in deep trouble if I interrupted them now, so I had no choice but to remain silent.

"Then..... what do you want me to do?"

Mafuyu's voice sounded like it was close to tears. You shouldn't have said that! Chiaki leaned her body over, as though she were about to step over the table, and placed an empty whiskey glass in front of Mafuyu.

"Drink."

A caramel-colored liquid flowed out of the glass bottle. No wait. But that's Shaoxing rice wine, yeah?

"I-I can't drink."

"Don't worry. I'll add sugar to it for you." Chiaki dumped a huge

spoonful of sugar into the whiskey glass. I can't see how that'll solve the problem.

"Chiaki, calm down, don't enter into your old-man mode!"

"Why can't I? I'll eventually become an old man anyway!" Like hell you will! You're a girl! "Geez! If we let Mafuyu off the hook this time, she'll definitely do something again that'll bring the band to the brink of dissolving!"

This has nothing to do with the band dissolving or not—Hey, wait! Before I could stop her, a desperate Mafuyu had already held her breath and brought the glass to her lips.

The next instant, Mafuyu collapsed on the floor with her face flushed red. The sound of cheers came right after. Oh please, she's not performing a stunt here! God damn those drunkards!



I carried the flushed Mafuyu to the restroom, and on the way back, Mafuyu's face had turned slightly green. As I was about to help her back to her seat, I nearly bumped into someone at the turn of the corridor. I raised my head and saw a pair of squinting eyes below a bandanna—it was Furukawa.

"Ah, s-sorry..... Urm, well, it's been hard on you today."

"You'll have to work harder in many areas!"

"Right." I shrunk my neck. Just then, Mafuyu struggled a little beside me.

"..... Thank you..... for earlier."

Mafuyu raised her head and murmured that towards Furukawa. I had no idea what she was talking about, so I turned my head to look at her.

"Earlier on..... he helped me connect my guitar to the wiring."

I then turned to face Furukawa again. I see, so that's the reason Mafuyu appeared onstage so suddenly. Furukawa frowned and stared at Mafuyu's hand for a long while, before saying,

"Your right hand can't move..... but how bad is it?"

"Eh.....?"

"Y-You can see that?" I was way more surprised than Mafuyu was.

"All it took was one look for me to realize. Don't underestimate a guitarist! If you continue to play the way you do, there won't be a future for you."

Mafuyu looked at her hand and fell into silence. She then squeezed past me to make her way back to her seat before me. I was about to follow her, but Furukawa grabbed me by the shoulders.

"..... Is there something you want?"

"Are you planning to stay in that band forever?"

Furukawa asked me with a frown. I nodded my head rather unnaturally. Why did he ask that?

"You should quit for the sake of the band."

"Eh? W-Why?"

"Your abilities are miles below that of the rest of the members!"

Whoa! I knew that very well myself, but it still hurt to hear him point it out directly.

"You know that as well, right?"

"I do, but....."

My gaze landed on my fingers.

I opened my left hand, then clenched it again. I lifted my head to look at Furukawa.

"..... This is my band."

"Is that so? Do as you wish then."

Furukawa pushed me hard on the shoulder, towards the seats. Just as I was about to head back, I heard another sentence from him behind me.

"If you guys give me that sort of bullshit again next time, I'll definitely punch you till you drop."

Despite being severely reprimanded by him, I was quite thankful for that last line—it meant we still had a chance for a next time.



"So there's a next time huh. Well said."

I was shocked by that sudden line. I turned my head around, and standing in the corridor was Kagurazaka-senpai, with the drunk Chiaki behind her.

"The sexual harassment in there is getting out of hand, so we ran away!" Chiaki ran over and grabbed Mafuyu by her arm. Mafuyu almost turned around to run away in fright.

"It's time for us to hold an evaluation meeting. Mafuyu, you can't run away even if you want to!"

"Uhh....."

Chiaki pulled the teary Mafuyu towards the stairs. I had no idea if Chiaki was sober or still drunk.

The four of us gathered at the entrance leading to the first floor, and began our evaluation meeting.

"Since we're a revolutionary army, why don't we start by evaluating ourselves? Let's surround Mafuyu and yell out what we think, okay? That's what they always do during sports activities and such."

"That's just plain bullying!" And where the heck did Chiaki get that idea from?

"That's already outdated! We're in the twenty-first century now. The modern-day revolutionists should carry out their self-evaluation like this....."

"Hyaa!"

Kagurazaka-senpai suddenly locked both of Mafuyu's arms behind her back, then began tickling her by her armpit. It just so happened that I was sitting two steps below them—and was kicked by Mafuyu as she struggled. I was really close to rolling down the stairs.

"Y-Y-Ya!" Mafuyu kept twisting about in Senpai's bosom.

"The self-evaluation's not over yet, Comrade Ebisawa, so stop your useless struggling!"

"Stop this for now!"

I couldn't help but interrupt, prying them apart. This time, Mafuyu hid herself behind Chiaki, who was patting Mafuyu on her head to console her.

"Young man, you're quite lacking in your critical judgement!"

"You just want to sexually harass her, yeah!?"

"But it should feel comfortable, right? Of course, I'm not saying that with a sexual connotation....."

Senpai suddenly brought her body close to Mafuyu's, and looked at her face. Does she not know when to stop? I was planning on yelling at her a little, but I suddenly noticed the gloom looming in her eyes; so I shut my mouth instead.

There should've only been one thing she was really asking—it felt really great when we were performing live, right?

That was what Senpai's eyes were telling me.

I turned my head and saw Mafuyu timidly sticking her head out from behind Chiaki's back. After staring at her right hand for a while, she nodded her head slightly.

Senpai let out a sigh of relief, something I wouldn't have imagined.

"Well then....."

Senpai stood between us and stuck her hand out with her palm facing downwards.

"There's a chance for us next time."

The very first person to place her right hand on Senpai's was Chiaki.

I then stretched my own hand out, as though I were attempting to cover their hands.

Finally, Mafuyu stretched her right hand out as well—the hand that lacked strength, whose fingers were unable to fully open, was so dreamily pale and slender. But to us, it was a right hand we couldn't do without. She placed it above our hands.



It was already late into the night when the party finished. A few of

the drunkards were planning to go for round two while they were still on a high. More than a dozen of the drunks had gathered on the dark sidewalk in front of the Chinese restaurant and stood there motionlessly, as though they were some sort of factory waste.

"I feel so dizzy....."

Mafuyu moaned, as she leaned her body weakly against my shoulders, beneath the flickering streetlight. Even though she had only drunk a single cup of wine (and had spit it out immediately after she sipped it), it seemed like a hangover was beginning to kick in for her.

"Are you feeling unwell?"

"Not to that extent yet."

"Then why doesn't Mafuyu join us for round two as well!" But Chiaki's unreasonable invitation was rejected.

"I'm going home."

Mafuyu carried her guitar—or, more like she was being supported by her guitar—and walked unsteadily on the streets of the night. Wait, you're not planning to walk home by yourself are you?

"I'll send you back! It's faster with a bicycle."

"What!? Nao's not joining us?" Chiaki sounded flustered. "But Senpai said she's going as well!"

"I can't drink. Moreover, Tetsurou's gonna complain if I get home late."

Though it wouldn't be because he was worried about me, but instead, because he was worried about his breakfast tomorrow.

"Oh, I see." Somehow, Chiaki's smile seemed a little forced. "Then see you tomorrow!"

"Mmm, tomorrow—but it's Sunday?"

Even if it was the holidays, club activities could only be carried out during the weekdays.

"What are you talking about? I'll pop in by your house tomorrow morning before I go home, so remember to prepare ochazuke for me!"^[1]

"..... Fine."

Chiaki was about to rejoin the group of drunkards, who had begun moving in smaller separate groups, when Mafuyu, who had been grabbing my arm the whole time, suddenly called out to her.

"Yes?"

"Thank you for today..... and sorry."

"But I haven't done anything." Chiaki smiled.

Not at all. I actually wanted to thank her as well.

It was because Chiaki was around, because she had been there waiting for us—

"Won't..... Chiaki be sad?"

Chiaki tilted her head in response to Mafuyu's question. I turned my head to look at Mafuyu's slightly green face from the side.

"You can go along with Kyouko now. But didn't you say before you were the same as me?"

"I'm not sad. It'd be much more painful if we couldn't be together."

I had no idea what Chiaki was talking about, but it seemed like Mafuyu did. She showed a teary smile and nodded her head.

"So I'll drown you in vodka if you try pulling another disappearing act again!"

"Sorry!" Mafuyu cowered in fear.

Chiaki waved her hands as she ran away from us. Mafuyu then sighed uncomfortably. She didn't look like she could stand properly at all.



I was sending Mafuyu back home on my bicycle, but the journey was much more difficult than when I had ferried her to the live house in the evening. This time, almost her entire body was leaning on me, and in addition, I had to carry her guitar as well as my bass. Moreover, I couldn't see too well because it was dark.

The only improvement was that it was way cooler than it was in the evening.

I chose to ride slowly in a lane without cars. I could hear the cries of the insects, the sound of the car engines from faraway, as well as the *jiri-jiri* sound of the dynamo in the bicycle light.

"Naomi....."

When we were riding along the road next to the dikes, the silent Mafuyu behind me suddenly spoke.

"Hmm?"

"Actually..... I was lying when I said my whole right hand was immobile down to my wrist."

"I know."

"How did you know!?"

Oi! Stop! Don't headbutt the person in front of you when he's cycling with two people on board! The bicycle Mafuyu and I was sitting on slithered along the road like a snake.

"Because you were grabbing on to me tightly when I was escorting you to the live house!"

"Ah....."

"..... Oi! Don't loosen your grip! What if you fall off!"

That's dangerous. Just what exactly does she want!

"So you pretended to believe my lie despite knowing all along? Idiot!"

She suddenly became angry for no reason. What's going on now?

Though, to put it more accurately, I wasn't a hundred percent sure if Mafuyu was lying or not—I just felt it was a possibility it was a lie. Regardless, all the possibilities would've dropped to zero if I hadn't forcibly brought Mafuyu along with me back then.

"You know, I wasn't really joking when I asked you to play with your teeth! You should be able to do it, since you're that good, right?"

"How could I have done that!?"

I suffered yet another headbutt in my back again. Man, that hurts.

"Are you content as long as you can listen to me play the guitar?"

"Well..... not just the guitar. There's the piano as well..... didn't I say so before?"

"That's not what I mean.....!"

I could feel the air behind me become incredibly scary all of a sudden, as though someone were about to strangle me.

"Actually, I didn't really like the original way you played the guitar. Your techniques were good, but....."

"You are just jealous!"

"Shush! But now, it won't do if you're not around....."

That was my heartfelt thought that I couldn't convey to her earlier through words.

Mafuyu headbutted me a third time, before saying,

"Say it once more."

"Hmm?"

"But now..... what?"

"It won't do if you're not around.....?" Did she not understand the meaning behind those words? "Because for both Senpai and Chiaki, your guitar is—"

"Kyouko or Chiaki, that doesn't matter. What about you?"

"..... Eh? Urm, I really like the way you play your guitar now! Somehow, it feels different from how it was back when you played alone. The way you play has changed as well, right?"

Mafuyu pressed her forehead close to my shoulder blade, then fell silent for a long time. We were already on the national highway; there was only a short distance to go before we passed the overhead bridge and reached the railways. After passing the railroad gates, we'd be quite close to Mafuyu's house.

"Me too."

I could feel Mafuyu's murmurs on my back.

"I'm in love..... with Naomi's....."



I braked hard before the crosswalk. Mafuyu's head swayed behind me.

Did she just..... say something really strange? No wait, or was I

just imagining things?

"Hey, Mafuyu."

"Don't stop all of a sudden! The guitar knocked against my leg."

"No, wait..... Just now—"

The sudden sound of a ringtone interrupted my words. It came from Mafuyu's phone. She got off the passenger seat and pulled her phone out of her pocket. Who's calling her?

"..... It's from Hitomi." Mafuyu frowned when she looked at the screen of her phone. Hitomi? Who's that? I looked at the screen, and she suddenly came to mind—Miss Matsumura.

I had called Miss Matsumura right after our performance to tell her I had already found Mafuyu, and that she didn't need to worry. But it was already late into the night—I should've called her again.

"..... Yes? Mmm. We'll be there soon. We are almost at the train station, and we will head right back..... Eh? E-Eh?"

Mafuyu's voice became more and more flustered. What's going on?

After hanging up and stuffing the phone back into her pocket, Mafuyu grabbed her guitar and jumped onto the passenger seat of the bicycle.

"H-Hurry! Just go somewhere, anywhere!"

"Eh? What do you mean by anywhere? We're about to reach your house, no?"

"I don't wanna! I don't want to go home today!"

I was stunned. At the crossroad, in the middle of the night, Mafuyu was hugging me tightly from behind—

And she said she didn't want to go home—

No wait, calm down. It's probably..... not that.....

"Quickly!"

Urged on by Mafuyu's headbutt, I began to pedal the bicycle slowly. Just as we passed the crossroad, a powerful beam of car lights shone right in front of us. The car roared to a stop—diagonally, right in front of us.

It was a foreign car I was familiar with, and I immediately knew the reason Mafuyu was flustered. The driver side door flung open, and the person who stepped out of the car was none other than—

"What time is it now!? I-It's so late already, and..... and she's together with you!? Just what is happening around here!?"

I almost fell off my seat in fright after seeing the incredibly scary face of the furious Ebichiri.

"Eh? Why.....? Urm, you're back in Japan already?" I thought you were in Boston?

"I just returned not too long ago!"

Whoa! That's just too much of a coincidence! Mafuyu was hugging me tightly and hiding herself behind my back. I didn't know if it was due to the shock, the fear, or the fatigue, but before I knew it, I had already rammed the pedals hard. Not long after, Ebichiri's angry roar disappeared behind us, and all that was left behind me was Mafuyu's warmth.

The wind of the summer night brushed by my ears. I could almost hear the words Mafuyu had said earlier, but I was no longer in the mood to ask her about it again. There were just too many things that couldn't be conveyed with words alone.



I cycled around places close to her house, and in the end, sent Mafuyu back home.

As for the hollers of Ebichiri, the cold glare of Miss Matsumura, and the two Dobermans baring their fangs at me—I don't think it's necessary for me to go into detail about them.



Overwhelmed by fatigue, I slept through most of Sunday—

And then Monday came.

It was our first gathering since the performance.

I had overslept by a lot, so I stopped by a convenience store on my way to school to buy some cold drinks as an apology. The straps

of the bass case dug hard into my shoulders, and were soaked with sweat, as I was burning under the harsh summer sunlight. It was really uncomfortable.

I was revitalized when I finally reached the much cooler courtyard at the back of the school.

Just then, I heard the sound of music.

It came from the clubroom. The door was slightly open, as something was stuck in the door—I could hear the sturdy sound of the drums, the crisp sound of the guitar, and the powerful vocals of Senpai come from inside the room.

Why are they playing with the door open? Ah, I remember Senpai saying something like getting the blouse to stick to their skin due to sweat or something..... Oh please, don't tell me you're really carrying that out!

I walked right up to the clubroom, but stopped in my tracks when I realized what song they were playing. It was <Desperado>. There was no way I was wrong about it.

But Senpai had said before that she definitely wouldn't sing that song.

I leaned against the concrete wall of the old music room and concentrated on Senpai's voice.

Somehow, I think I understand now the reason she said that.

Senpai's very first band was dissolved the very next day after she had sung that song on stage by herself.

There was a depressing reason behind it, but that song must've been something really special to her. And that was why she could no longer sing it again after that.

And it felt like I understood the reason we practiced songs by The Eagles whenever everyone wasn't there yet. Despite The Eagles going through many member changes, their songs still sounded as solid as ever. Even if it was a song formed by overlapping the sounds of various guitars, they were still able to replicate it perfectly once they hit the stage. Moreover, all the members in the band were vocalists, so the chorus always sounded especially rich.

If someone wasn't there, the missing void would be incredibly obvious—that was the sort of band they were.

And the reason we played their songs each and every time, was because Senpai wanted to confirm that fact—

..... Wait! Mafuyu, stop playing the beats of the bass as well! That's just really depressing! Did they even realize I wasn't around?

I recalled Furukawa's words at the celebration party, and my feelings sunk even lower.

"You should quit for the sake of the band."

It might've been true that I was the only one dragging the band down. However, I was finally able to say it loudly and clearly—

"This is my band."

I readjusted the straps on my shoulders.

There was Chiaki—and Mafuyu as well.

feketerigó would be born once I walked in. Regardless of how sad the song we were singing was, Senpai would never be on her own again.

I immersed myself in Senpai's voice again as she sang <Desperado>—

*Come down from your fences, open the gate
It may be rainin', but there's a rainbow above you*

Before the singing of the desperado came to an end, I grabbed the handle, and pushed the slightly opened door.

Notes

1. [Chazuke's wiki](#)

Credits

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